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George Washington Ogden

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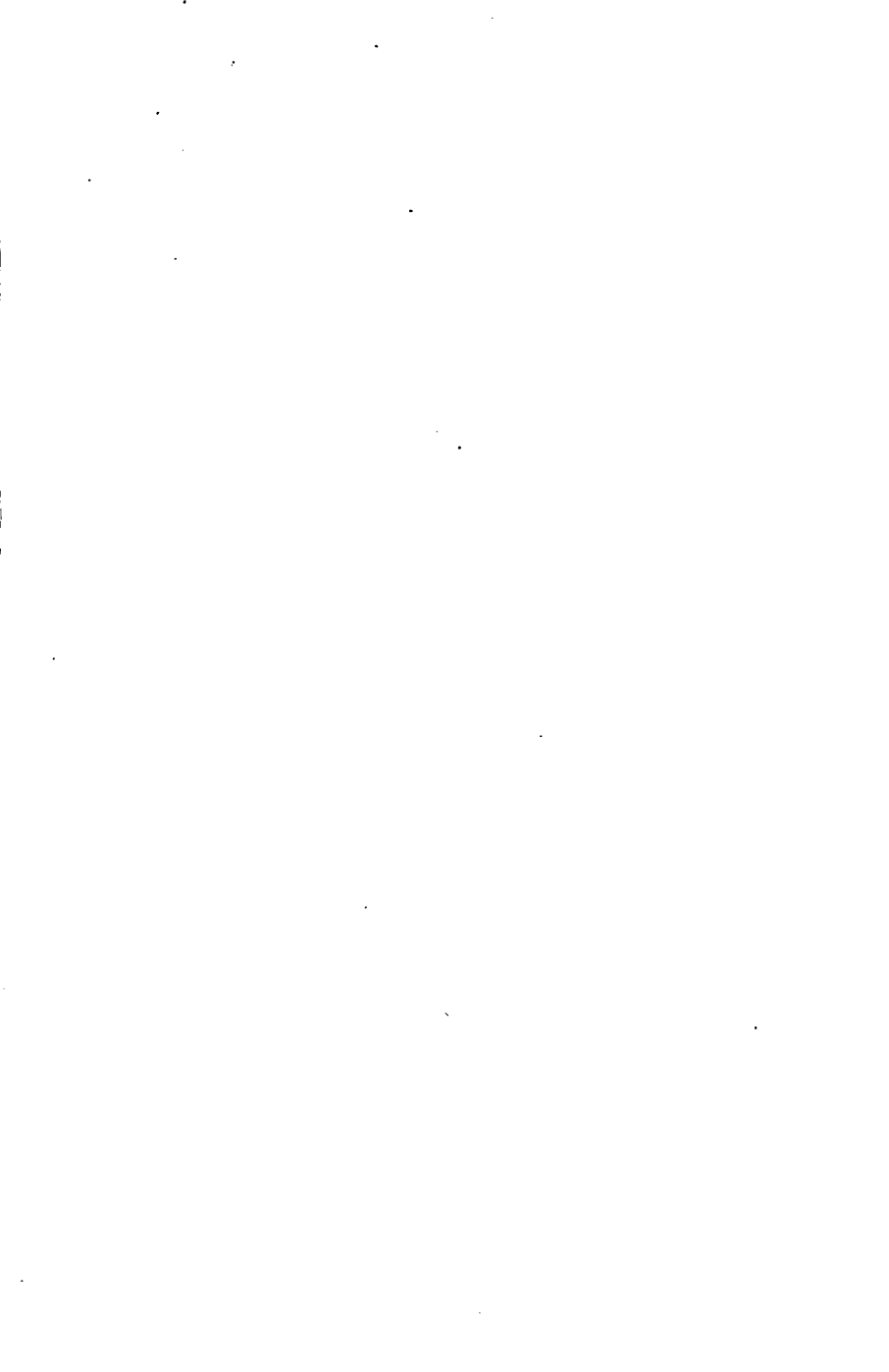
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RETURN TO
HUDSON MAXIM
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THE LONG FIGHT





"I've set my heart to win up to you."

(See page 287)

THE LONG FIGHT

BY
GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN
AUTHOR OF "HOME PLACE"

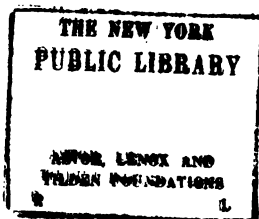


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THE LONG FIGHT

**RETURN TO
HUDSON MAXIM
LANDING, N. J.**

THE LONG FIGHT

CHAPTER I

AN OLD MAN'S DREAM

IN Oil City there was but one street, which was plainly inadequate for the present necessities and future expectations of the place. It was a broad street, beginning at the railroad and blending into the grey prairie at the ridge of the hill, half a mile or more to the east.

But long as it was, and broad, it could not contain all the houses of the town, and nobody seemed to be interested in plotting other thoroughfares and aligning the unplaced abodes, and so they hovered on the flanks of Oil City's Broadway as if they had spattered down in a shower. Most of them had grown from the nucleus of wagon or tent, and either a wagon or a tent was still prominent in the long run of them, like germinal nodules in some unlovely growth.

For Oil City was a new place, and canvas and corrugated sheet-iron, and boards bright from the

mills, were the most stable materials which men had laid their hands to in building yet. It does not require such a strong-sided abode to contain a man as it does to confine oil, and the architects and artisans of Oil City were going in night and day shifts to provide house room for that liquid marrow of the earth.

Oil City was a place where men handled the forces of nature familiarly; where they corked and uncorked whistling gas wells with no more thought over their temerity than less adventurous people, in a great deal larger cities, give to turning their house gas pipes. There they put down long, slender holes through the rind of the earth and opened its turgid arteries, which gushed their fat in black riches over the unprepared land, wasting daily enough fuel to move the commerce of Oklahoma State.

Unlike gold, one must have a large store-house, and a strong one, to put oil in when it comes. Buckskin bags will not do for that, nor the quills of eagle feathers, nor empty powder cans. Men may follow the trickle of gold to its farthest lurking-place, but human eye never has beheld the source of petroleum; nature leaves gold uncovered in the ledges and the sands, as a thing despised, but petroleum it stores where the secrets of earth's youth are hidden fast away. When men pierce to it, sometimes it gushes eagerly, as if earth had grown weary of its secret, and welcomed even that pin-vent of relief.

That is why men should be ready when they go seeking oil, ready with pipes to convey it, valves to restrain it, tanks to receive its flow. It seldom occurs that they are prepared. They had not been prepared in the place where Oil City stood, with the slush of black mud in its long, trampled, wheel-cut street. They were trying to catch up with the waste now, after the first unrestrained heat of exploration was past.

Already hundreds of steel tanks, each having a capacity of many thousand barrels, stood in regular rows out on the level prairie beyond the farther end of Oil City's Broadway. Never before in the story of oil had such tremendous preparations been made for storing it, for men never had struck so near the fountain-head before. It seemed that an ocean of the black liquid lay beneath that spot, and those who had not been enriched by it already, felt themselves rich in its promises.

If a man hadn't land to prospect for oil, he had some service to render, some commodity to dispose of, some scheme, plan or pursuit, which would lead him, in his calculations at least, directly to the wealth that oil was heaping up for its owners, hour by hour, day and night.

Only a few months past, the spot where Oil City now stood had been part of Colonel Seth Turnbull's stock farm. His house was there, on the wooded hillside to the southward of all this new activity, white like a dove among the green. And then

one day somebody brought in an oil well, at an amazing shallowness, back on the levels beyond the hillcrest which the ambitious street of Oil City already had reached in its short and vigorous career.

When the drills of the first explorers demonstrated that they had located the largest body of petroleum ever tapped, the frontier of speculative adventure shifted from the fields farther north, at the Kansas border. Men packed up their drills and machinery, their folding houses, their tents, merchandise, hotels, restaurants; put their schemes in their valises, their dreams in their pockets, and flocked to the new pool, to unfold them there in a night, and stand ready for business with the rising sun.

The railroad did not come within ten miles of the new field in those early days—a month's residence made a man an old settler there—but a man with a hotel all packed and ready could find a conveyance, and a person with a scheme could very well walk. At any rate they all got there, and came down in a night, like a cloud of grasshoppers. Oil City was on the map the next morning, and business houses began to arrange themselves in straggling order along the public road that ran through Colonel Turnbull's farm.

But early as they were on the ground, the schemers and promoters found that capital, quiet capital, big capital, had arrived ahead of them. It had

bound up everything that could be obtained in leaseholds for miles on every hand, and there was nothing left for the schemers and promoters but the drippings from the bucket, represented by the royalties land-holders were receiving, or would receive in time, on the output from the wells.

Still, the prospect was so good, even in that, that everybody expected to get rich. As time passed, the chances of realising on these expectations were enhanced by developments in the field. The railroad came close on the heels of the capitalists, to carry away the product of their wells; troops of mechanics, regiments of labourers, corps of engineers, were brought in to build the immense steel tanks and sink the wells to that marvellous lake—it seemed almost a sea—of oil.

And that was the way that Oil City came to be there, that autumn day, a town founded upon expectation, rather than the healthy outgrowth of necessity. The big business enterprise that had hold of the development of the field had no need for the place at all, for it had its own city of red turrets on the prairie beyond. The company's several thousand workmen and engineers were quartered in various places over the vast field of activity, and the only reason for Oil City being there at all was that there always is somebody by to hold a bucket for the drippings of other people's fortunes.

The men who laboured at erecting the big round tanks, laying the lines of pipe from wells to reser-

voirs, boring and delving and shovelling away, were liberally paid and they spent liberally. In time, of course, a permanent town must have been the result of this mighty enterprise, and Oil City was the rough of it, the vanguard trampling down the foundation.

In Oil City there were banks for the thrifty and saloons for the profligate; tented theatres for those seeking to be entertained, and a tented church for such as desired to be saved. There were business places housed in tents with square-faced fronts of boards, to give them the aspect of permanency, and a bank near the railroad with its tin walls painted to resemble bricks, to impress upon the world a sense of its strength. There was a freight-car with the wheels removed, standing beside a long bank of cinders, that served as passenger and freight depot, and above everything, over everything, floated the gaseous, sharp scent of fresh-run oil.

Miles of tank cars stood on the long sidings, shifted and jostled and pushed about continually by a snub-nosed engine. Hundreds of these were filled daily, and at that they were labouring only to carry away the surplusage. There was no waste where the big company worked, but around the wells of the hasty, the feverish diggers, the unprepared, the slop-over of one day would have replenished the lamps of the civilised earth. For there were some who had elected to remain independent of the big company, certain men who could do their own develop-

ing, and gather the full proceeds of whatever their wells might yield.

The oil of these men stood in pools, hollowed hastily out of the ground and banked about with earth, or ran away from their spouting wells in streams, or spread over vast levels of what had been cultivated land. It was the acrid scent of its evaporation that streamed miles abroad to meet the traveller. Now that they had it, there was no place to put it, and nobody to buy it from them. The big company was taking care of its own first. After a while, when it got around to it, ponderously, like a German army, it would negotiate with them.

Meantime, the activity of Oil City grew. By day long lines of wagons laboured through the muddy street in that fall weather which was over it in the time that we see it first. They bore the curved segments of the big tanks from railroad to storage ground, they carried drilling machinery, they transported tents and supplies for the inland camps. And in those times men were busy with saw and hammer, fortifying the flimsy structures in which they lived and transacted business against the coming of sterner weather. The smoke of busy restaurants rose high, and the smell of their condiments, their fries, their stews, mingled with the clean, thin breath of oil.

By night it was another scene. Booted labourers, dark Mexicans and bearded Slavs, skulking Greeks, furtive Italians, straggled before the illumined storefronts, each man taking his pleasure, or pursuing his

business, after the manner of his nation and his kind. Groups of engineers and foremen, who had come down from the works to be entertained, walked decorously among the streaming residue of far lands, clean-limbed, alert. They were mostly young men, with old faces and work-wrinkled eyes, and they seemed as princes in that sluggish current from the tailings of the world.

Oil City cooked for them, spread its stocks of garments before their eyes, arrayed its bottled goods in its windows, sang for them, fiddled to draw them in, danced for them and with them, and charged them money for every token, favour and smile. And so prosperity jingled its silver in its jeans, and everybody had more work than he could do. But if there remained even one person who had more money than he could spend, it was not the fault of Oil City and its tent-covered lures.

Aside from this activity, and partaking neither of its profits nor its pleasures, more than four miles intervening between his abode and the pillared portico of Colonel Turnbull, this raucous infant city lying between, lived the man who had a dream one day, and such strong faith in its promise, that this lusty thing had grown out of it. Like most of the dreamers, too, the profits of his vision had passed over his head.

Seven years before the first drill bit through the crust which lay above the Big Pool, as it was now called, old Solomon Heiskell had told his neighbours

that there was petroleum under that land. Old Solomon Heiskell, poor as bean soup, living in his log house on his forty acres of scrabbled hills, told them that he had gathered oil from the surface of a stream that had its rise from a big spring on his place, wrung it out of cloths and refined it in a home-made still.

Just a little way down, said he, they would come to it. He said it was his belief that they were living over, and plowing their fields and grazing their pastures above, the biggest deposit of petroleum in the globe. He went around among his prosperous neighbours, and finally succeeded in interesting Colonel Turnbull to the point of visiting the stream which carried the film of oil.

On that day there was not a trace of oil on its two-yards-wide surface. Colonel Turnbull gave his fat shoulders a jerk, and curled his lip in a scornful smile.

"Your jug must have run dry, Sol," said he, and turned his back.

Sol did not know at that time that the oil appeared only intermittently. When he learned this fact it would have done no good to explain. People thought that he had set a foolish trap to try to sell his worthless forty to Colonel Turnbull. They said he was a cunning old rascal, and had their laugh. Sol made indignant denial. He had hoped only to interest the colonel in the development of a prospect; his place was not for sale, he said; money

would not buy it. They laughed louder at that. And then old Solomon said he'd show them.

He sold off the few head of cattle that he owned and bought a drill to run by horse-power. When he began his operations on the hillside above the spring, people owned that they had been mistaken in him. Old Sol wasn't a rogue, said they; he was a plain, damn fool.

But he had one disciple, his boy Ared, his only child. The boy was just then coming up to the hurdle of manhood, long-legged as a young colt. He was a thin-faced lad, after the mould of his pioneering ancestors, severe and solemn in his cast. His nose was big and his forehead straight and high, with a great, shadowing sweep of black hair above it, which always looked wind-blown and vexed, no matter how calm the day. He commonly worked in the field, or rode after the cattle hatless, and his face was brown as sun and wind could make it. Under the shadow of that tumbled hair his eyes were as mild and as blue as violets among russet leaves.

People liked Ared. It was a pity, they said, that a lad of his sanity and education should be misled by old Solomon's foolish dream. But Ared knew that his father was neither a crook nor a crank. He had helped gather the oil in woollen cloths and wring it out, and together they had contrived the still which turned it into kerosene. Ared had seen the refined oil burn in the lamp. He knew that it issued forth from no "plant" save nature's own.

Before the cattle were sold to purchase the drill, Solomon had talked the venture out with his boy, who urged him to go forward with his idea of prospecting and prove to the neighbourhood that he was right in his contention. And so the drill was bought, and the first tedious hole was put down four hundred feet in the chin of the rocky hill, covered over with its beard of red scrub-oak.

People began to pity old Solomon when they saw him persistently wasting his slim substance in pursuit of his fatuous dream. Consider the tip of the land between there and the Beaumont fields, the nearest oil country to the south of them, and between there and Kansas, the nearest oil to the north. Right there where Heiskell was drilling a man would have to go down five or six miles to hit oil, which ran on a level, they said.

They knew all about it. Every man is his own geologist in a mining country, and one man can see as deep into the earth as another, anywhere. But they had brought experts in to survey the ground, long before Solomon Heiskell found the oil on the stream, at the time that the roaring gushers were being brought in at Beaumont. There was no possibility of ever striking oil there, the experts said, and the people who had paid the bill kept saying it after them. Besides that, consider the lay of the land.

At four hundred feet, Solomon gave up his first hole, his theory being that oil could not seep that far.

Instead of discontinuing his explorations there, he scraped around and assembled enough money, somehow, to buy an old boiler and engine, which Ared rigged to run the drill.

All that winter the old man drilled, selling his hogs to buy coal for the boiler. Ared was teaching school beyond riding distance of home, the post in the home district having been refused him. The board wouldn't take any chances with a crazy man's son; it might run in the family, they said. Before the term was finished, this distrust of his basic soundness had spread to the board that employed him, and Ared was discharged.

He went home, and put his savings into the exploration for oil. Between that time and spring they sank numerous holes in the hillside, but their labours were not rewarded by so much as a scent of oil upon the drill. Finally they agreed to make one supreme, far-driving effort, upon which their entire resources should be centred.

To provide the sinews for this, Heiskell raised a loan of three hundred dollars on his forty acres of land. Everybody considered that a most generous loan, but it was well understood that the cunning of a crazy man is sometimes sharper than the reason of the sane. Solomon had deceived those bankers at the county seat into it, so his neighbours said.

With the money in hand, Solomon and Ared squared their rusty old engine around to a fresh spot

and went to work anew. Planting time came, but they were too much taken with their strange infatuation to leave off and put in a crop. They were down a thousand feet by May, and gnawing a little deeper day by day.

August, two thousand feet, and still going down; down through limestone and gravel, sand and granite, slate, salt, coal, iron; down to the back-bone of the earth. One day the churnings from the hole told of zinc, at another time of lead, but they were too deep down to be reached with profit. Solomon Heiskell wanted none of those involatile metals. He was after oil. Oil would rise to the top of water, let it stand never so deep in his bore, and it could be pumped out from any depth. If his dream came true, it would gush forth in a black column and deliver itself into his hands.

At twenty-seven hundred feet the little old engine, as if quite exhausted and thoroughly discouraged by the hopeless outlook, stopped on a centre and refused to move again. Investigation proved to Ared that all the tinkering of all the machinists in Oklahoma never would set it on its chugging labours again. Like an old horse, or an old man that adversity and hard-knocks have pelted to the ground, kindness and coaxing would avail nothing now. It was worn out in every part.

The money was at an end, also. So old Solomon Heiskell put his hand on his big boy's shoulder, looked up into his solemn, purpose-set face and

smiled. Then he shook his long grey hair and said it was the end.

What he said on that day in appreciation of the courage, fidelity and support of his son struck deeper into the young man's heart than their drill ever had sounded the earth. It hurt Solomon Heiskell to stop there, after he had done enough to confirm everybody in the belief that he was a fool. There would be no proving his case now. He had convicted himself.

"But it's there," said he, with undiminished faith, "and somebody will find it in time."

So they wound the drill in on its long rope, and left it dangling there above the hole, like the steel skeleton of some great thing on its melancholy gibbet. People could see it from the highway that thriddled in and out among old Solomon's hills, and when they looked at it in passing, they shook their heads from the heights of their superior wisdom, and groaned. What a speaking lesson it was! said they. It was well of Solomon to leave it there, where they could point out his folly to their sons.

Which is according to the judgment of the world. If a man finds treasure in an unlikely place, the reward of chance, rather than the remuneration of persistency and courage, he is applauded for his sagacity. But let him search unavailingly where none before him has uncovered it, and the kindest word that men have in their judgment of him is—fool.

A blight lay over Solomon Heiskell and his son from that day. People spoke to them patronisingly, as to inferiors, watching them keenly when they were near, as if prepared to defend against any sudden outbreak of violence. There was no more teaching for Ared in that county, for the story of their vagaries had spread afar.

Following his profession, he went to Kansas, where employment was offered, leaving the old man alone. People said that Solomon spent his days walking about among his prospect holes, sniffing at them, like a dog at the burrow of a rabbit, as if he expected the oil to rise in them overnight.

After two years away in Kansas, Ared had returned and invested his savings in a flock of sheep, which he herded over the hills. That was a good business for a cracked man, his neighbours said. It didn't take much brains to raise sheep.

After a year or two Ared began to prosper in a mild way. He enlarged his field by leasing hill land adjoining his father's acres, paid off the old man's mortgage note, and his flock increased. He was well enough pleased to draw away from the people around him, for his ways were not their ways, and his fame was not enlarged by the strange figure that he made following his sheep over the hills. Always he wore boots to his knees, like a cavalryman, and in the fall and winter weather he appeared in a long, grey, tattered coat, which he belted round him with a broad strap. Usually he carried a book in one

hand and his hat, which he put on his head when anybody approached, in the other.

Yes, there was no doubt about it, people said; Ared Heiskell was cracked. It ran in the family, like a geological fault. As for old Solomon, he hoed his peanuts and sweet potatoes, and shunned people as studiously as they avoided him. Solomon was ashamed of the thing that he had attempted and left half done. All he hoped for now was that he might live to see his theory vindicated, and the dearest thing that he kept warm in his disappointed old heart was the wish that his boy Ared might be the man to prove him right.

And so, when oil was struck at less than a fourth the depth of Solomon's great well, back on the prairie two miles from him, where the land rose even higher than his bushy hills, people remembered his dream, which appeared now to be not altogether the distillation of an empty head.

"But not where he was diggin'," they said, in vindication of their undying ridicule and contempt. "You wouldn't hit oil there under four miles, for you've got to look at the lay of the land."

CHAPTER II

THE SLAYING OF THE FLOCK

SO many people had come into that country since the founding of Oil City that the original inhabitants were drowned in numbers. The traditions of their twenty-years-old civilisation were obliterated by the friction of new feet, and another story was beginning in that place.

Of the thousands who came and went there day by day, few knew the history of the rusty little boiler standing in the bushes on the hillside a mile east of town, with the swinging drill on its tall derrick nearby. Derricks and drills were a sight common enough in that country now, and the wonder of them had passed away. The one curious fact which made this derrick and drill unique among hundreds, was that of their inactivity. Brush had grown up between the wheels of the boiler, saplings had reared their tops to a level with its stack. The evidence of abandonment was written in its rust.

When capital came in there before the rush and began to take leases on everything that looked like it would sustain a hole, it had not offered to include Solomon Heiskell's land in its exploration territory.

This was a sad disappointment to the old man, and it lay bitterly along with the memory of his past struggle, which had indurated in his heart.

The marks of thorough prospecting which the place presented were poor argument for the inducement of other promoters to take hold. In addition to these old scars, there was the story of Solomon Heiskell's deep bore, the deepest hole that ever had been put down in search of oil in the southwestern fields. The editor of the *Oil City Star* had the story in the third number of his paper. In the course of his rambling, loose-jointed article the editor referred to Heiskell as the "Prophet of Oil" in that country. The editor had kept the story in type, which he printed every little while when news ran low, an expedient justified by the shifting character of the population. What was news to last week's audience would serve very well again for the week after next.

Heiskell had tried to interest some of the minor developers in his place, but his story, obscure as it was, always appeared to arrive ahead of him. They put him off vaguely, as one stays the importunities of a child, and their manner seemed to say to him that, while he probably was the one and original Prophet of Oil in that place, he was a mighty poor guesser when it came to realising on his forecast.

Ared had not seemed greatly moved by the discovery of such vast wealth in the very shadow of their pioneer explorations, beyond his satisfaction in seeing his father's contention upheld in larger meas-

ure than either of them ever had permitted himself to dream. He had not been stirred out of his serenity, nor shaken from his philosophical contentment with the things which he found sufficient for his day.

Viewed in comparison with the zeal which he had displayed in the trying times when they massed their resources to drive down the wells, Solomon could not understand his son's placidity and apparent indifference to the riches in which he had no hand. The old man sometimes looked at him sharply, as if to censure him, or urge him into the big race in which less worthy men were snatching fortunes every day.

He did not know that Ared had come to believe, in his later and saner days, that there was no oil within reach beneath their stony acres. It was not for them to pluck sudden riches from the breast of the earth. What they won must be paid for, long years in advance, in unceasing vigilance and unending toil. It was emblematic of their barren labours, the young man often thought, that their giant well should stand as dry as a chimney down to its utmost depths. It was nature's sardonic humour, illustrative of the futility of their melancholy infatuation.

Intermittently the little stream which issued from the hillside below the cabin bore oil upon its surface, as it did in the days when its discovery first fired the old man's hope, and as it probably had done ever since it came forth from the dark places where it had its beginning. No more came, and no less, for

all that had been struck, and all that was being drawn forth, in the Big Pool district, scarcely two miles away. It flowed on unchanged, vexing the old man with the belief that its source still lay untroubled, its mystery unsolved.

And so, while Ared went placidly after his sheep, ranging them from hill to hill, Solomon Heiskell hung about the fringe of the activities in which he had no part. He became a familiar figure around the Midland Hotel—which had grown from all tent to two wooden stories—where he made himself known to likely-looking men and placed before them what he had come to call, in the loose language of the promoter, his “proposition.”

Heiskell was an unusual figure, even in that place of strangely assorted men, so thin and tall, and hollowed out by his long-hidden fever. He went about in tall boots, his long grey hair reaching his collar, his black cravat neatly tied at the throat of his tan flannel shirt. His face was scholarly, large-boned, dry-cheeked, and always scrupulously shaved clean of beard. There were more dreams than schemes in his countenance, and men who were on the hot trail for quick fortunes never could be induced to listen to him twice.

Solomon believed that the business way to approach a man was to unfold his credentials, and the references of his past.

“For fifteen years I was principal of a school in Kansas City, sir,” he would tell a stranger, with

childish ingenuousness, "but I had to give it up on account of my health. It was my kidneys, sir." With that Solomon would lift his eyes, apologetically, and go on. "When the Strip was opened, I made the run. Others went faster than I could go with my poor team and my impedimenta, so I had to go farther. I made my way down to this country, and when I got here everything but the hills was taken up. My wife died here, and my son's grown up here, and I've sold off all my original claim but the forty that this proposition of mine is located in. But my kidneys are cured," he would sigh, with satisfaction, as if that balanced the books of his adversity.

People who had taken root up and down the Broadway of Oil City grew in time to accept Heiskell as one of the institutions of the country. To strangers whom he sought out and attempted to interest in his "proposition" he was a garrulous old humbug, who hadn't any more oil in his prospect than a chip. This indifference of capital, and his inability to interest it, served only as a bellows-draft to the re-kindling fire of the old man's faith in his drill-scarred hillsides.

In the old days, when he and his son had failed of the oil, he had put down his dream, but he never had resigned it. The obloquy under which he had lived since those days had been a painful thing to bear, but his son's somnolence of ambition seemed the unkindest thing that the snarl of fortune had pre-

sented. It was the rebuke of his age, the humiliation of his sinking years.

Ared had accumulated enough property in sheep to make a dignified effort with the drill once more, the old man argued, but it seemed that he meant to shame his father's blood. If he would sell his flock and put the money into machinery and explosives, Solomon felt that he should be eased down to his grave in affluence.

More than once in the past months the old man had broken the matter to his son, and it was a snag between them which threatened to divide the hitherto unruffled current of their loyalty. Ared would not quarrel over it, neither could the old man's stories of the young and the old, the worthy and the unworthy, who were picking up riches every day, move him from the calm of indifference into which Heiskell believed he had settled from association with his foolish sheep.

The frenzy of desire had laid hold of Solomon Heiskell. Where a thirty-barrel well would have filled the expectation and rewarded the longing of his earlier years, he now considered nothing worth while under a 3000-barrel gusher. There was nobody in Oil City thinking in small terms, with the probable exception of the young Jew who kept the 10-cent store, and already the shadows of his present dimes were magnified to the diameter of future dollars. The ten-cent store was but a passing expedient; it would grow into a fifty thousand dollar block.

But there was no such outlook for Ared with his sheep. Slow plodding, and slow turning of his money gained in wearing exposure and wearying vigils, might bring him in his old age to the ownership of certain outcast lands, with a grey and dusty respectability. He could hope for no more, said Solomon.

Sheep had come, therefore, not alone between him and his boy, but between his boy and the great, worthy, manly rewards of life. It was an exposition of contemptible cowardice when Fortune was standing there daring men of spirit to embrace her, tempting them on by such open enchantment. One must have only sheep's courage, indeed, to remain calm and unquickenened by desire.

Old Solomon spent many a malediction against the sheep, and pounded his brain through many a troubled hour in pursuit of some plan, always elusive and intangible, through which he might shake his big boy Ared out of his wool-padded drowse. He must bring him back to the eagerness and strength of desire which animated the lad in the days of their first explorations; he must strike a spark in his somnolent breast. The Heiskells had been men in their successive generations; one of that strain never had fallen into the plodding gait of a flock-master before that day. They had been men before the hot forge of the world, valiant in war, aggressive in peace, strong in love and hate.

Love! Perhaps so—perhaps so. If there could

come a woman to trouble the waters of his boy's deep soul! Ah, the thought was warm in old Solomon's heart as he paced the worn path between cabin and dangling drill. He beat his hands upon his breast, like a Mussulman at prayer; he felt the prickling of his inspiration in his veins.

If a woman could come across his boy's way and break the sunlight of his meadows, urge him out of his rustic lethargy, give him a new purpose for striving. But where was the woman to come from, who was she to be? Women were not commanded by the whim of an old man's desire for such adventures. Still, Solomon Heiskell held this fancy, and drew warm hope out of it, for the space that men usually hold a fruitless inspiration—until the sunlight of another day gleams through the warp of its inconsistencies. He gave it over then, with sighs, for it had its excellencies, and returned to cursing the sheep.

The passing of this vagrant idea left Solomon doubly vindictive in a dislike which had become distinct and rancorous against each separate member of his son's fleecy herd. On the night following its flash he strode the path between his historic well and cabin door again, after his custom of years when the dross of his ambition became a weight almost beyond his endurance to bear.

Moonlight was over the scrubby hills. A wind, foraging like a rabbit, came through the draw, moving the fallen leaves. The sun-leached oak shingles of the cabin were white as frost under the full-faced

moon; a shadow black as a heavy pen-stroke slanted beneath the out-projecting broad lintel board above the door. Below and beyond were the lights of Oil City, swung high above the tents and hasty structures of the place, and there on the hill's instep, two hundred yards from the house, was the sheep-fold. The sheep, huddled asleep within its security, seemed a blotch of unmelted snow against the dark hillside.

Ared had returned that evening from marketing lambs at the Kansas City stock yards, weary, dusty, yet mildly triumphant. Solomon had thought, with hidden contempt, that he made as much over the few hundred dollars thus realised as a far greater reward in a nobler field of endeavour would have justified. Yet, if the boy would unstrap his purse and put the money to some dignified labour—and there was none more dignified than sounding nature's secrets and drawing away its riches—it would even mitigate the baseness of its source.

But Ared had no nearer intention of doing that with the profit from the increase of his flock than he had shown in the spring, when he sold his fleece. Solomon realised that, with bitterness. The young man was asleep in his end of the house, dedicated to his private use since he was a boy, and his sheep were asleep in their fold near by, flock and master alike careless of the luring tumult of the world.

Old Solomon walked down the slope to the fold, and stood leaning his arms upon the gate, looking

over at the sheep, the rancour of his disappointment in his son clouding his pedantic face. It was a thing almost incredible, the moving hate that the old man carried against the guileless beasts which he had invested with a dignity and importance quite undeserved. He was jealous of them, as a man grows jealous of reasoning creatures; he blamed them with the alienation of his son's heart from the ways and desires of a rugged man.

Heiskell lifted his arms in denunciative gesture and cursed the sheep, his long, fantastic shadow reaching out over them as they lay asleep. An old ram, wrinkled of neck, solemn of face, which reposed near the gate with his head up, champing his last cud of the day's gleanings, rose stiffly and stood regarding his visitor in gravity.

"Yes, he's chosen between me and you!" said Solomon, threatening the horned patriarch with his fist. "For such low ministering he throws away the golden chance of life. I'll not put up with it, you bleating devils, I'll not endure it another hour!"

Solomon turned from the gate and looked toward the house. His son's window was gleamed over by moonlight, in a cold stare like a dead eye. His bed was beside it, the old man knew, where he could lift himself on his elbow and look down at his sheep with the first-coming glint of day. Perhaps he woke in the night to assure himself that all was well, as he, Solomon Heiskell, had woke in the night in years outlived, to go softly to the bedside of his sleeping

son and quiet the panting fear that death might have intervened and robbed him while he dreamed.

The old man choked with the recollection; scalding tears stole out upon his weathered cheeks. He put his hand out in caressing movement, remembering the damp forehead of the sleeping boy upon the pillow, his cheek resting on his little arm. Warm, pulsing with life; the mysterious fire still burning, and all well. No ground for his foolish fear, thank God, thank God!

But sheep had stolen his son's heart away. Better death than such inglorious life. Sheep had blinded him to the broad possibilities of his time and place, dulled him to the call of manly achievement and noble endeavour. Better death in the still summer night of infancy, with the sweat of his labouring breath upon his pure brow.

A great pang of jealous loneliness surged in the old man's breast. He pressed his toil-bent fingers to his face, and stood a little while in silence.

"I'll not endure it another hour!" he said at last, repeating his feeling declaration of a few minutes before.

Back toward the house he went, taking the steep slant of the path in long strides. In the chopping-block near the corner of the house the axe was hacked, its helve pointing toward the moon like a finger lifted to call witness to the thing that Solomon Heiskell, in the pain of his unreasoning passion, was about to do.

He wrenched the axe from its place, turned and plunged down the hill again, carrying the implement in his swinging hand at his side. Without a look back at the glinting window of his son's room, he threw the gate of the sheep-fold open, closed it behind him with backward fumbling, and lifted his weapon to its bloody work.

The old ram had finished his cud and had lain down to his repose. Upon his hoary, horned head the first blow fell. The father of the flock stretched out in death without a sigh, and Solomon leaped to his work of destruction among the scrambling ewes and shrinking wethers which fled before him to the farthest corner of the corral. There, hemmed in the acute angle of the fence, the packed sheep fell under the old man's strong, quick blows.

As they had lived, inoffensively, weak, shrinking and timid, the sheep died, struggling against the fence, shuddering in close-packed wedge. Silently they died, or silently they drug their maimed bodies aside, and old Solomon's anger mounted as he struck at lifted heads and woolly backs, now with poll, now with edge. The blood of the beasts splashed him; he felt it warm upon his hands.

From corner to corner he followed the stragglers of the thinning herd, slaying without pity, striking without reason, never pausing one moment to reckon the cost of that hot hour's work. The sleeves of his shirt were soaked with blood, the helve of his axe was slippery with it, he could feel it running down

from his garments into his shoes, but with every beast that fell he felt that he was clearing away a stone of the barrier which had grown up between him and his son.

His spent strength, and not his reason nor his pity, caused him to stay his hand at last. Panting, trembling, he leaned against the fence and looked over the slaughter that he had done. The slain sheep lay in heaps in the fence-corners, and stretched singly and in groups where he had overtaken them on their way to that fancied refuge among their fellows. Here and there a maimed animal stood or lay, or drug itself slowly along, but of the three hundred animals which the fold confined when he entered it, not a score remained whole and alive.

The wind was freshening. It struck the old man's blood-wet garments with chilling touch, bringing a shudder over him. He looked around upon the ruin that he had accomplished, nodding his head as one satisfied.

"Now we'll see," said he.

He went to the gate, laid his hand on it as if to open it, but paused and turned to survey again the scene of blood.

"Now we'll see," he repeated, an inflection of satisfaction in his voice.

In the oil-tainted brook Solomon washed the blood from the axe and from his shoes, considering meantime what disposition he should make of his stained trousers and shirt. He must leave no marks be-

hind him leading up to the discovery of the hand that had wrought destruction among the flock; Ared must be strengthened in the supposition which was sure to be the outcome of investigation of the scene, that some unknown enemy had stolen in there and struck down his sheep.

To this end Solomon made a bundle of his soiled garments and hid them under the bushes near the brookside. Doubtful that he had quite cleansed the axe, he concealed it along with them. To-morrow, said he, a fire would blot out every stain. That done he went to the house, clothed only as nature had provided him upon his introduction to the world. Before retiring he stole silently to his son's chamber door and pushed it open gently. The great fellow was stretched in the patch of moonlight that struck in across his bed, his cheek pillowed on his arm in boyish posture.

Solomon reached out his hand in that empty caress, standing in the half-open door. But the yearning of his heart, and the hunger of his eyes went farther. Perhaps it is under the benison of such things that we dream when our visions lead to heaven.

There was no question of justification in the old man's mind, no weighing of right or wrong, no consideration of the sharp loss this would be to his son. His one concern was his ability to cover his own tracks, and inwardly he exulted that the thing was done. It was not the deed of a sane man, he told

himself as he stretched on his bed. The thought provoked a smile. Some wandering lunatic had done it. Let it go at that.

He did not dream that long brooding, and fruitless pursuit of an elusive desire, perhaps had warped his reason. His one thought of consequence as the outgrowth of his midnight foray against the flock, was that he had removed the barrier that kept his son out of his heart and away from the big chances of the world. That was justification. It would have served, in the same consoling measure, as palliation for a graver crime.

Solomon slept late the next morning, for the bloody banquet had left him weary. The sun was up when he woke, its autumnal amber was washing the hilltops and reaching kindly into shadowed ravines. He knew that Ared must have been out of bed two hours before him, and he wondered that he had not come back to the house with a report of what he had found.

Puzzled over that particular, the old man hurried to his son's room and looked through his window down the hill to the sheep-fold. The sheep lay there as he had left them, but Ared was not in sight.

"Looking for tracks," said he, nodding, a hint of a smile on his face. "Well, let him look!"

When he had dressed he went down to the sheep-fold, expecting to find his son there among the sheds. But no; there was no trace of him. Solomon called

him. His voice went sounding and echoing down the still ravine, but no answer came.

It was a shocking thing to see the sheep lying there in their blood, and the marks of his own feet in it where he had pursued them to their end, smears of it on their fleeces where he had kicked them aside as they fell around him, encumbering his legs. The realisation of the extent of his atrocious deed struck the old man with sudden, quailing force. He exclaimed in horror, as if beholding for the first time the work of another, the depravity which prompted it quite beyond his understanding.

"Master Almighty, did I do that!" he whispered, clutching the fence to sustain his stricken limbs.

He gazed in sickening revulsion; his eyeballs were hot in his head, his mouth stood open, his lips were dry. How the things huddled together, all bloody and gashed—how they seemed to appeal for mercy, even in their dumb attitudes of death!

"Master Almighty, did I do that!" he gasped again.

Then he loosed his hold upon the fence and staggered blindly away a little space, calling his son's name tremulously. No answer. Here and there he ran, then, in a frenzy of new fear. What had happened to the boy? Where had he concealed himself?

From the gate of the fold there led a bloody trail toward the brook. The breath caught in the old man's throat when he saw it, as plainly marked as if

a bleeding corse had been carried along, dripping its trail of vengeance and betrayal.

"Ared—sonny—my little boy!"

Not realising in that distracted moment that it was his own bloody trail that he was following, old Solomon hastened on. On the bank of the little stream there lay spread his bloody garments, the axe beside them, blood in the grain of the helve, blood clotted where the wood fitted into the eye. Ared had found them; Ared knew whose hand had dealt death among his sheep.

Sobered, sane with a wrench so sudden that the adjustment was as painful as a needle-thrust in the eyeball, the dreadful folly of his past brooding and misguided ambition clear to him now as the October sky above his head, Solomon made a bundle of his smeared garments, took the stained axe in his hand and laboured up the hill to the house. There he dropped his load and hastened to a hilltop which commanded the road to Oil City, and the sweep of country for miles on every hand, save to the northward alone, the region of the Big Pool, and the great city of tanks which stood upon the levels there.

There was no sight of Ared on the road, no glimpse of him among the hills. Solomon shouted his name through his cupped hands, facing this way and that. The echoes gave it back, wistfully, but as for Ared the world was empty. He was not among his familiar hills. The discovery of such perfidious treachery in a hand that he had loved had driven

him away. Old Solomon Heiskell bowed his head upon his hands, and sat down there among the stones of his barren hills, and wept, calling upon his son's name, as that other father called in the agony of his heart, upon the name of one slain in the woods of Ephraim, "O Absalom, my son, my son!"

CHAPTER III

A SONG AT TWILIGHT

ARED had walked away from home empty-handed, save for the money which he had received from the sale of his lambs. The slaughter of his flock would have been sufficient in itself to move him deeply, even though the author of the outrage had remained undiscovered. It seemed the deed of a madman, yet he could not believe his father unbalanced. Through his constant association with him all the years of his life he had not marked any indication of insanity. He had been unreasonable about the sheep, true; but a man may have his prejudices and yet remain sane.

The young man could not account for the thing in any other way except the very motive that drove Solomon Heiskell to it, and that seemed to him a strange and violent length for a mild-hearted man like his father to go. Yet, the old man had urged him to plunge into the tide of financial adventure which washed their hills, and he had taunted him about the sheep with growing acerbity many a time. Now he had made havoc among them, thinking perhaps that he was doing his son a kindness thereby.

He had dissolved the ignoble bondage, as he was fond of calling it, in one stealthy night's work.

Solomon Heiskell was to have his wish, then. He had chafed under his son's easy satisfaction with little, and that little hardly got. He had urged him to take the world bare-armed and plant his feet sturdily for a fall, and bring home one of the big purses such as other men were taking down every day. Very well, he was to have his way at last. But in what bitterness of heart Ared was setting forth to enter the affray!

He could not trust himself to turn back to the house after finding those guilty garments tucked under the buck-bushes by the stream. Better no words at parting, thought he, than words of reproach, which might leap into a flame that would destroy what remained between them. As it stood now, time would spread its coagulative balsam above the scar. After years he could return, when the sorrowful astonishment of to-day had yielded place to reasonable reflection. It would not be dangerous to speak of these things then, as now, and until such time as he could say "It is over with and forgotten," Ared felt that he must not see his father's face again.

Oil City was emptying itself of its diggers and delvers, its bearers of burdens and all its plodding population of slow thought and humble aspirations, as Ared walked along the main street while the east was yet red with the alarm of the coming sun. The

dreamers who were sending them forth to toil could sleep longer; the doers of big things could turn again on their pillows and breathe another hour of sweet refreshment. It is the man with the small aim that works from seven to six in this high-shooting age.

Some detached themselves, by pairs, by scores, here and there where new excavations marked the sites of permanent buildings which the business of Oil City already justified; here and there others arranged themselves before cement mixers which were already mouthing out their grey streams into the waiting barrows. But mainly the out-going stream of men ran on to the place where oil had established its capital.

They were a heavy-footed, dead-eyed rout of men, thought Ared, who seemed actuated by no grander nor larger thought than the wage of that special day. They were meek courtiers before the sovereignty of wealth, to which the men of all nations own allegiance, and they had gathered there from many lands. The heavy-heeled Mexican trailed along behind the sprightly Sicilian, who went singing to his labour, and the sluggish Greek passed with bent head, side by side with dull Slavonic men, whose leaden faces told that the fires of their souls were dead.

With no definite end in view, Ared marched on with the throng, out upon the prairie land where the big steel reservoirs for storing oil stood. It looked as if some Oriental city had sunk there into the

prairie sea, leaving the tops of its turrets above the earth to tell of its grandeur and extent. Two thousand acres, men said, had been set aside by the company to build its vast storage depot upon, and there across the long levels the regular streets of red-painted tanks ran, hundreds of the reservoirs finished and in use, hundreds more in process of construction. Thirty thousand barrels of oil was the capacity of a small tank, and there were wells in plenty within two miles of the place which would fill one of that size every week.

From the place of storage the hundreds-miles-long pipe lines stretched forth, carrying the crude product of the wells as far north as the Missouri River, as far east as the Wabash, to the company's refineries. Day and night the heavy stream of oil throbbed through these lines, forced on its long journey by marvellously tremendous machinery in the pumping stations at the refineries.

Even in the land of oil itself men hardly realised the vastness of this enterprise, or the magnificent organisation which built on such splendid plans. The big company did not advertise itself by announcing plans and publishing intentions. Like an invading army it came, prepared to make an end of the task before it. In a day it brought in its train-loads of material, its hundreds of workmen, and the development of the labour itself usually was the first word of its extent.

Although Ared Heiskell had herded his sheep

over the hills not three miles distant from the town of tanks, he had not been cognisant of the rapid development in the preparations for housing the oil. The sudden discovery of its magnitude was an electrifying, awakening shock. Was it possible that he had been asleep through such gigantic labours? Perhaps his father was not without justification, when the worst was said, in his desire to send his son out among the giants of the earth who were achieving so tremendously.

Filled with the admiring wonder of the great work, the young man walked through the long lanes of tanks, overstepping the great feed pipes, pausing now and again at the scene of some new activity, where the swart labourers swarmed, bearing segments of thin steel, rolled into plates, each one of them marked and numbered in the perfect plan of construction; where rapid riveting machines volleyed their short vibrations with painful charge upon human ears, and bare-armed mechanics lorded it over the sweating burden-bearers who served them with the steel.

His long coat belted about his tall, spare figure, his rustic boots, his shock of untrimmed hair; his ascetic face, his peering, wonder-struck eyes, made him the mark of jests from the foremen and mechanics, of curious, long stares from the foreign labourers. Perhaps he seemed to them as much out of place as he felt himself to be.

All day his astonished faculties fed upon the won-

ders of that place. He walked far out into the field of exploration, where the derricks stood as thick as shocks of wheat over the Big Pool. Scores of drilling outfits were at work sinking new wells, and far away against the sky the smoke of hundreds more were seen. Automobiles filled with men and surveying instruments, oil-stained land-owners, mud-splattered drillers, spick and span capitalists from distant cities, mechanics hurrying to repair some broken engine or drill, snorted madly through the picture of activity, like insane insects in an ant-hill. Light conveyances drawn by horses, their drivers urging the animals along with feverish leaning forward, watchful, strained glancing from side to side, as if conscious of the inferiority and archaism of their outfits in the rapid competition of that new time, pressed on to distant destinations with supplies and parts of machinery.

Nobody was idle there, save the solitary onlooker alone. A score of times during the morning he was hailed by sweating, grease-daubed foremen and asked if he wanted work. He began to feel like a deserter from the army of industry, with his repeated refusals piling in accusative heap behind him, as the day filled on.

No, he didn't want work serying somebody else. As long as he had slept through the first clashing and clattering of that mighty event, he must not lend himself to the service of another now to repair what he had left to others by default. If he became one

in that moving scene it must be as master, not as man.

But there was confusion in his mind. He could not see even as far as to-morrow. Yet, the sharpness of the tragedy in the sheep-fold was blunted by this mighty argument of industry. He had been whetting away his time, his life, youth and energy in that pastoral security. Even though a man did not attain wealth and power in that contest around him, he would be better for the striving, whatever the reward. Perhaps his father had his justification. It seemed now a thing long past, and time-eased. Perhaps the old man was right in the application of his bitter remedy. Perhaps, perhaps.

Still, he could not bring himself to the point of returning home and making peace with his father. At bottom it was an atrocious deed, and inexcusable from all reasonable points. If pressed properly, he would have sold the sheep, argued the flock-master without a flock. If his father had not clung so persistently to his old infatuation that there was oil to be had beneath their rocks, and had left off his insistent dinning in an effort to draw him to put more money into more unyielding holes, he could have been led to dispose of his flock. Now there lay fifteen hundred dollars up in the bloody fold on the hillside, wasted. There was no salvage save the skins, and he hadn't the heart, nor the interest left in him, to go back and strip them from the carcasses.

Fifteen hundred dollars. It represented the day

shepherding and the night vigils of five slow years, yet it was not a day's income for more than one man in that place. A day's income, and that too on an investment of but a few months' work at the most, and in many cases not any at all. What satisfaction, what ease of feeling and comfort of self-regard, thought he, in an income like that when it is the return from an investment of courage, and thought, and brains.

Perhaps the old man was right in his dinning and urging. Beyond question he *was* right—only, if he had not bloodied the argument in that brutal and unnecessary way.

Ared found himself again in Oil City at nightfall. He engaged a bed in one of the tent hotels, and after supper went out to see the town take its pleasure on a more intimate footing than he ever had observed it before. On his former brief visits to Oil City after his day on the downs with the sheep, he passed its lures and stood aside from its riot as a stranger. Now he felt himself to be one of its people, for he had thrown the seed of his fortunes there to sprout, and grow into what time and chance might make of them.

Following many of the concerns of the place which were hardening from the instability of tentcloth into the substantiality of boards, the theatre was settling down into the form of a permanent institution. The proprietor had housed his indispensable bar, and the body of his "Amusement Palace" as he called it—

and perhaps believed it to be—under boards. Along the sides of the wall he had built gaudily-painted boxes, with tables in them, at which the "ladies" of the show drank with the patrons of the house.

There were chairs for several hundred, with saw-dust spread deep in the aisles, and there were frequent pauses in the tedious programme during which patrons were expected to visit the bar and moisten themselves to the dripping point, an expectation which they generally ignobly fulfilled.

The musician of the house was an old man whose back was bent from long years at the pianoforte, whose shoulders were narrow, and arms long. He was German of type, strong and severe of face, with great rough eyebrows, a military moustache and little tuft of beard which clung to his lip in the wholly tentative fashion of little beards which the owners grow to protect the mouth against the chafing of a horn. The old man's hair and whiskers were white, with a little stain of amber on moustache and lip protector where the stem of his pipe went through.

He was the orchestra, and his instrument was a piano, which seemed almost as old and battered as himself. Only it was in precise tune. There were no discords in its joints, whatever might be true of his own, and no jangling in its nerves, no matter what his own stiffness when he moved about might betray.

Ared, who sat in a box among the elite—the patronage of the place being confined to men—

watched the musician as he played for the low-grade performers on the stage. He seldom lifted his eyes from the music-rack, and when he was playing without music his head bent even lower than its customary pose, as if he felt ashamed of the mean service that he was rendering. He was like some fine piece of furniture brought to a base usage, the young man thought, pitying him from his heart.

The young man sat forward in the box out of the shadows, his weather-worn hat on his knee, so serious, grim and ministerial that the "ladies" of the company, of whom there appeared to be four, looked him over in their solicitation for drinks, and passed on without a word. He was bored with the show, but his interest in the old musician held him there, somehow, although he felt that it was a trifling waste of time.

He was roused from this train of reflection by the appearance of a new entertainer on the stage. It was a young woman conventionally dressed, who came forward with a frightened question in her serious, dark eyes, and an appeal in the glance which she cast over the rough audience. But a softness as of assurance came into her strained face when she looked down at the old musician, who was no longer the figure of shrinking indifference.

The old man had straightened up with her entrance, and his face was lifted now, almost eagerly, it seemed. He began the prelude to her song with his breath held, Ared thought, so anxious he ap-

peared to please her. It was "Love's Old Sweet Song," which is dear to us all from its unstriving simplicity. Her pure soprano tones caressed the melody as it fell from her lips. Each note seemed a kiss of summer winds. The chaffering of the drinking men in the boxes fell silent as she sang; the boisterous merriment of the house grew still. It was as unexpected in that place of debasement as a prayer.

"Just a song at twilight,
When the lights are low——"

Ared Heiskell leaned and listened to that exquisite voice, as dulcet as falling water. He was strangely and deeply moved with the essence of a sharp and sudden longing, as one waking to find himself bereft. He felt how barren and empty, purposeless and crude, his life had been. He could have wept for the endearments of love and laughter which, in his isolation, he had been denied.

She finished her song in the silence which held over the house like sleep, standing a moment while the old musician rounded out his soft, dreamy accompaniment. When it was done she bent her stately head in a little salute, more to her accompanist than her auditors, it was plain. A flush had come into her cheeks. It relieved the fright of her eyes, and lighted up her youth and comeliness like a beam through a cathedral pane.

Some big-handed fellow in splashed corduroys

near the front smote his palms together as she stood there poised as if to turn and flee. The enthusiasm of the house broke after him, and it rushed upon her in clamorous approval. A smile took seat in her eyes with that unexpected tribute. It diffused its quickening beams over her sweet young face. From his place near the stage Ared Heiskell saw tears glistening on her cheeks.

The spell of her voice was over him, still echoing in his senses, the visions which it had stirred still held their brief enchantment. With his great broad hat in his hand he rose, and swept her a bow like a plumed cavalier. It was the tribute of a gentleman to genius, unobtrusive and graceful. She understood, and accepted it as it was given. For one moment her eyes found his as she turned and left the stage.

She returned presently in response to their loud demand, and the old musician reached behind his piano and drew out a violin. She sang "The Last Rose of Summer," the old man supplying a feeling obligato. There followed a demonstration of approval similar to the first, but she could not be called farther than the wings, from which she bowed, and shook her head.

"Now look at her, look at her!" said some one who had entered the box in which Ared sat, unheard during the applause. The speaker stood behind Ared, and his voice was thick with disgust. "No, *she* won't give you another little tune, boys—you can

pound your heels off tryin' to bring her on, she won't come. Makes me sick!"

"But she's some singer," said another, in a rumble that sounded like it came through a crack in the fence.

"Yaw!" depreciated the first speaker. "What good's that to the house? She won't come out and drink with the boys!"

"Introduce me, Decker," the other requested.

Ared turned. The one called Decker, evidently the manager or proprietor of the place, was in his shirt-sleeves and white vest. Blue elastic bands, with bows on them, such as Indians and cowherders are fond of wearing, held up the surplus length of his voluminous sleeves. He was a small, pimply man, red moustached, aggravated of complexion, and snarling of cast. He looked like an ill-tempered cat.

His companion was a large man in long overcoat and cream-coloured sombrero. A close-clipped, grubby moustache blackened his lip, and his chin was blunt and broad, like the end of a coal barge. His mouth was not beautified nor humanised by the outward curve of lips. It lay flat against his teeth, like the gully of a scar, and it was vast and far-spreading, and covetous and grim. He champed a half-burned cigar, which was more precious to him than words. When he talked, he spoke around it, holding it firmly in its corner, his thin lips parted sneeringly to let out the muffled sound.

"She'll come by the office in a little while for her

money," said Decker, turning away. "You can see her then if you want to. I'm lettin' her out to-night."

"But they like her stunt, Decker, why don't you keep her?" said the cigar.

"I'm payin' her fifteen a week," Decker complained, "and she ain't turnin' in fifteen cents to the house. She orto be doublin' her salary in sales, but you can't git *her* to come out and take a drink with the boys!"

Decker went off grumbling, the undertones of his friend coming in on his plaint occasionally as they went down the passage.

Another entertainer was on the boards, and the audience had put off its garment of respectability to applaud her fat calves, and pat time to the vulgar song that she was singing. For Heiskell the interest was gone out of the thing. The old musician had drooped over his keys again, his white head quite hidden from the poor, brazen creature who sported in walrus-like heaves and convulsions behind the lights. She was singing something about what she called her "air-o-plane," and

"A tip-top ride to a tip-top town,"

the original fabric of the composition evidently warped to suit her lewd desires. In similitude of the flying apparatus she spread her stubby arms and reeled about, while the old man at the piano played over and over again the few strains of the waltz-time song.

Heiskell, with his inborn fineness and gentlemanly regard for the rights and feelings of others, no matter how unworthy or obscure, felt that he must sit out the song. He was too conspicuously seated to leave in the midst of it, and, besides that, others had come into the box and were seated around the two little tables at his back. They appeared to be enjoying it, and he felt that he had no right to mar their pleasure.

At last the "air-o-plane" concluded its flight, and scudded on large legs to the cover of its hangar, represented by the wings of the scenery. During the period of whistling and stamping which followed the successful landing, Heiskell made his way out of the box and along the passage leading to the front door by way of the bar.

He was thinking, soberly, of the difference between "ladies" and plain, virtuous, clean, clear-eyed women as he went out into the cool night. "Ruth Sterling, in the Songs Your Mother Sang," the hand-painted bill on the boards in front of the theatre announced her. He paused there a little while, looking at the bill musingly. His mother had not sung those songs. Perhaps the mothers of other men had sung them; doubtless it was so. Yet, he was better pleased that he should carry the memory of their first cadence in his ears from her fair, honest lips.

She would not come out and drink with the boys. No, certainly she would *not*. It was warm in his

heart to know that. But it did not require the disgusted manager's word to give her a character. That was poured into the crystal of her eyes.

He went on, hesitating again a moment at the corner of the theatre, where a hand painted on the boards directed to the office. It was dark around there. He glanced that way, and went on. Should he go home and declare peace? It was not late, perhaps his father——

There came a running step behind him, and the sound of a panting breath. A hand was laid on his arm, and then he heard her voice, recognising it before he knew her face there in the glimmer of receding lights.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came—I thought you weren't coming," said she.

Startled, amazed, he made no reply. He halted, stupidly.

"That man—help me; take me away from here—quick!" she whispered, still implying by her demeanour that she had hastened to join one for whom she waited.

"I didn't think you'd be ready so soon, I might have hurried," said he, carrying off his part of it very well, now that he understood. "Which way?" he asked, in undertones.

"Walk on—anywhere—hurry," she returned.

It must be the man with the flat mouth, thought Heiskell, his resentment rising at the recollection of the coarse face and champed cigar. Yes, it was

so. He was clambering into an automobile in front of the theatre. As Heiskell looked, the fellow gave the steering wheel a twist, rounded the machine sharply about and drove after them. As he came alongside, he slowed down to a pace equal with their own, driving as near to the walk as he could pilot his craft.

Heiskell stopped, his blood beating hot in his temples, his body quivering with indignant resentment of the affront. She pressed his arm, drawing him over to the window of a jewelry shop, where she pretended to be interested in the display.

"Don't quarrel with him—he might shoot you, or something," said she.

"Where shall I take you?" he asked again.

"I was staying at the Midland," she said, "but the proprietor says I owe him money—so I can't go back. He came down and collected my week's salary, and I'm discharged."

He felt the tremor of a suppressed sob in the arm that linked his own.

"I know; I heard Decker tell that fellow he was going to discharge you," he told her. "Never mind, you're well out of that place. You didn't belong there—not for a single minute."

"Thank you," said she, lifting her eyes, full of gratitude. "But I'm——"

"Out of money and without friends in this place," he finished for her, seeing that her words hung.

She nodded, childishly, looking down to hide her tears.

"The hotel man presented a long bill for extras that I never had," she said. "And he refuses to let me have my little old trunk."

The man in the automobile was circling slowly in the broad street, like some sinister bird of prey hovering over its quarry.

Heiskell was watching him, reading deeper than his rustic appearance might indicate that he could see.

"Yes, they wanted to leave you destitute, that was their intention," said he, as if communing with himself.

"What shall I do?" she asked in alarm. "There he is, hanging after us like a wolf!"

She shuddered closer to him, with the confidence of innocence.

"Where are your relatives—friends?" he asked.

"None nearer than Kansas City. Oh, if I——"

"There's a train in exactly twelve minutes," said he, facing her toward the station.

"But I can't accept—you don't mean?" said she, fragmentarily, breathless with the surprise of the sudden change of her dark fortunes. But there was the glad note of relief in her voice, which she could not conceal.

"You belong at home," said he, with indisputable conviction.

"I was a fool to go out with that old show!" said

she. "It broke up in San Antonio," she hurried to explain, "and my money gave out here on the way back. I didn't have even enough left to telegraph home, and I wouldn't have done it—not then—anyhow. They didn't want me to go," she said.

"Of course not," said he, gently.

"I thought it was the beginning of a career—I always wanted to sing," she excused.

"Sing for those who love you," he advised, searching her face gravely with his solemn eyes. "Where shall I send your trunk, Miss Sterling?"

"No, no—I'll pay him and have it sent—and that isn't my name, it's the one I assumed for the stage. My own," she owned, contritely, "is Jane Sloane."

"It's a very comfortable-sounding name, too," said he.

"Yes, it don't sound nearly so common to me to-night," she sighed.

"Why, you're nothing but a child," said he, patting her hand as it rested in full confidence on his arm.

"Come on, we mustn't miss that train."

"Father is a lawyer," said she, as if Heiskell's office of friendship demanded no reservations. "He's been a judge of the supreme court of our state, and oh, I don't know what all."

"He'll be as glad to have you home as I am to be able to send you," said he.

"But I'm not a child," she denied, seriously. "I'm old enough to vote."

"Well, so am I," he laughed, "but that doesn't insure me against making a dunce of myself now and then."

"I hoped to be able to return to them in independence, if not in triumph," she said. "And now I'm about to accept the bounty of a——"

"We must get your tickets," he interposed. "There's the train."

She protested when he would have bought a sleeping-car ticket.

"I'll sit in the chair car, and be glad," she said.

They were obliged to hurry forward to the chair car, urged on by impatient brakemen who were waiting to give the signal to go. The train was moving as she mounted the steps, but he kept pace with it, for she was clinging to his hand. As the wheels began to turn faster, and Heiskell was reluctantly releasing her hand, she bent suddenly and kissed his bare forehead.

Then she ran up the steps and disappeared within the car, not turning to look back. Hat in hand, Heiskell stood, dangerously near the moving train, gazing after it as if he expected another miracle. It was drawing away rapidly; presently its red lights twinkled past, and the possibility of a small romance between them was at an end.

They had met, touched and parted, and she doubtless meant by that—he did not name the caress, even to himself, but lifted his hand to the spot where her warm lips had pressed and touched it reverently—

she meant by that, of course, to tell him that the beginning was the end, also.

"She didn't even ask me my name," he told himself, remembering that circumstance when it was beyond repair. "Well, perhaps she didn't want to know."

He turned. Decker's friend, the man of the flat mouth and the fixed cigar, was standing not two yards away, seeming to tower over him in his bulk and strength. He gave Heiskell one searching, appraising look, swung about on his heel and walked deliberately away.

Heiskell felt the hot rising of blood in his temples again, for the man's manner was contemptuous, the very set of his back as he walked off with hands in his trousers pockets, his long coat pushed back at the skirts to admit them, was a challenge and an insult, a studied provocation.

Heiskell wondered who he was, that he should spread himself with such lordly importance. An inferior, low fellow, at the best, thought he, from the high place to which the benediction of that parting kiss had lifted him. Let him strut, she was beyond his tainted hand.

It was then too late to consider going home and making peace with his father. In the morning, said he, it would be his first work, and then, when that was done, he would turn again and breast the world. He would cast about him for his place in it, and the labours and the rewards that it might hold. But no

matter where he met it, or in what endeavour, it would be as master, not as man.

That was his final and clear determination. Master, not man. He lifted his hand to his forehead again, where the spot her lips had touched seemed to glow in gentle warmth. Master, and not man.

CHAPTER IV

PURTY

SOLOMON HEISKELL was gone. The padlock was on the door, the old buckboard and the horse were missing from their place. Ared found the silence of abandonment over the premises when he arrived before the sun lifted the hill.

He had come early in the studied intention of having it all adjusted and over with, and not hanging like a disintegrated lump in his conscience. For there were big things ahead of him now. He was glowing with the consciousness of that, and he was as eager as a reaper whose ripe field lies beckoning him in the morning sun. A few words, a handshake, and farewell. That was the programme which Ared carried with him up the hill.

Now, the old man was gone. Perhaps it was better that way, all summed up and reduced to its finest. This conviction grew on the young man when he turned toward the cluttered sheep-fold. It was one thing to think and resolve in the night, and another to speak by day. A little more time, the lapse of a year or two to blunt the edge of yes-

terday's resentment, which seemed, in the sight of the slain sheep, yet too sharp for safe handling.

Time would repair his fortunes, also, and the frame of a mind in prosperity is toward generosity in forgiving. Let it be so, then. It was for the best that the old man had gone.

But if he was to come out of the scramble which he had squared his shoulders to enter, he must not overlook the little things in striving for the big. So said Ared, looking down the hill at the heaps of bloody sheep. There was a dollar each to be saved by stripping the dead animals of their hides. Two days' work would see it through, and then he could go down the hill again to meet the world. The cool weather was with him, and even three hundred dollars from three hundred pelts was not an item to be despised when a man was setting out to do battle with a giant on his own ground.

He was grateful for the sequestration of his hills, and thankful that he had no too neighbourly neighbours to whom the thing must be explained. When he had made an end of skinning the carcasses he heaped them in piles, drenched them with crude petroleum and set them on fire. In that region of strong, diversified and strange odours, where the taint of oil rode heavily over the most insistent perfume, or noxious exhalation that man or nature could concoct, one more unusual smell excited no curiosity. Perhaps people thought it was a new quality of oil burning at some distant well.

He consigned the raw hides to a commission house in Kansas City, and went back to the house in the hills to pack up his belongings and remove them to the seat of his new life and sudden activities. That was soon done, for his possessions were as simple as his life had been. Everything went into the imitation-leather suitcase which he had bought that morning at the Racket Store. He put it down on the doorstep a moment while he snapped the padlock in the hasp. His father carried a key. Perhaps they should meet there again some day on that humble threshold, where each of them had held his divergent dreams.

He felt the constriction of that pang which it requires more indifference than strength to escape when one is leaving familiar places to embark upon some indefinite adventure. The strongest have dewed the old doorstep with their tears at parting, even though the gentle memories that remained with it were few. It has been to countless world-wanderers the beginning of home, and the end. Perhaps it is this foreshadowing at such times that reaches out of the unknown and fastens itself upon the heart.

There were pleasant recollections for Ared Heiskell behind that storm-streaked door. There the light of understanding had come into his life; there he had gleaned in the pleasant fields of romance, history, philosophy; there the smile of his mother had illumined the rough board at which they gathered, and her gentle ministrations had eased the

barrenness of their bleak walls like the kind curtaining of a storied tapestry. The light had gone out of her kind face there; there she had lain, cold and white and pure, consecrating it to sacred tenderness for evermore.

He took his hat from his head and stood as he had waited on that sad day for them to bear her forth to her last bed yonder among the mullein on the slope. And where, he wondered, was that old man whom she had left to his pilgrimage alone? Where was he wandering that hour, the long grey hair upon his temples, the ashes of old hopes that did not blossom, in his eyes?

It must be that he intended to come back one day. He had taken his key to the padlock, and he had left her picture behind him there, hanging in its little oval walnut frame above the fireplace. That hearth had been their shrine in the old days. He felt that it would draw both of them back to it, to sit in its rekindled glow, in the end, no matter what the triumphs or the sad failures of either of them should be.

He put his hand out, gently, as one reaching to caress a dear head in the dark, and stroked the rough boards of the crudely-fashioned door. The suns of twenty years, and the rains and the beating winds, had turned it grey as an old man's beard. Lint softened over it like a hoar frost; the great nails which held it firm were black in their sockets with rust. It was unlovely, humble and low, but it was

the portal of home. An empty home, with cold ashes on its hearth, from which the hearts which should have been warm in close affection within it had gone forth in bitterness.

That day saw its developments for young Heiskell. Before mid-afternoon he had turned the first stone in what he hoped would prove the foundation of his new fortunes. He had become the owner of a complete drilling outfit—engine, tackle, drum, drill and all.

He had seen the outfit standing idle on a lot among a cluster of small tents, wagons and patched shanties, and it struck him as singular that it was the sole idle drill—save that on his own hillside—in the country. Inquiry from the man in charge discovered the fact that it was for sale by the widow of the man who had operated it. A three-gallon can of nitro-glycerine which he let slip out of his hands one day, while giving a well-shooter a hand, had removed him at once from the worries and ambitions of his kind.

Ared stood by while the watchman told him this, and many other intimate particulars of the former owner's life, doing some swift thinking. It was not likely that he could march right out into the oil fields and link arms with a fortune. There must be a beginning, and why not that beginning at putting down wells for people who had lands and leases? It was a branch of the industry which none understood better than himself. His experience had

been varied, if melancholy and barren. Perhaps it was to bring fruit at last.

The outcome of his examination into his own mind, and the interior of the boiler and engine, was his purchase of the outfit from the widow at a very low price. It left him enough out of his capital, counting in what he was certain to receive from the sale of the sheep skins, to make a comfortable beginning.

The widow from whom he bought the machinery kept a small restaurant, which was located on the forward end of the lot on which the drilling outfit stood. She sighed in long-suspended relief as she tucked the money into the bosom of her dress.

"A lady without a husband ain't got no business with a drill," said she. She stopped, her hand on the flap of the tent, as she was going back to her boiling cabbage. "You be careful of them three-cornered cans, young man," she warned, shaking her head solemnly. "Don't you never go carryin' 'em around and steppin' over things, like my man did. Hit his toe on a steam pipe, they said."

Ared thanked her for her interest in his future, and promised that he would let the well-shooters do the carrying of the explosives for themselves. There was a tent among the numerous things which went with the machinery, and this he pitched, with the widow's permission, beside his engine and prepared to make his quarters there until he could secure a contract driving a well.

This done, he struck a line for the office of the *Oil City Star*, the copy for an advertisement in his pocket. The paper, after the manner of other quick-developing industries in that place, had grown in a few months from a blur-faced weekly to a machine-set daily, with a pony news service, and two smudgy reporters who went tearing around regardless of holes in the ground, and the various configurations of nature, hungrily snatching up the news. There was no lack of incident in Oil City and territory, where men blew the bottom out of the earth, and the tops off their heads, almost daily, bringing in oil gushers and gas spouters, each last one bigger than any that had gone before—according to the owners, and the panting young men of the *Star*. So the paper had a general circulation, and it was the sign-board for a man to announce his wares upon, argued Ared.

His advertisement stated that an experienced driller was prepared to furnish estimates and carry out the work of exploration for oil and gas. He picked out the place in the paper where he wanted it, paid for it and received the congratulations of the editor on his business acumen. The advertisement was to appear in the issue of next day, it being an evening paper.

After supper Ared sat outside his tent, feeling very well satisfied with the day's developments. He had baited the snare of fortune, and he must sit by now a little while and wait the outcome. If his

advertisement failed to bring results within a day or two, he would begin a canvass of the fields and work up business. It was there; if it did not come to him then he would go to it.

Over across the lot, a few rods distant, an old man was frying and baking his supper over the coals of an open fire. He had begun his preparations late, and seemed to have no lamp. Now and then he struck a utensil or a stick of wood with his foot as he moved about, swore at it and gave it an extra kick. But in the main he seemed a cheerful old grub, for he sang now and then, with an air strangely lugubrious and slow of measure for the words, a song which seemed to be appropriate enough for the occasion, seeing that it was supper-time.

"Oh, I'll eat when I'm hungry,

I'll drink when I'm dry,

If a tree don't fall on me

I'll live till I die."

That seemed to be the chorus of his song, which was a conglomerate stringing together of disconnected and unrelated events. Such as

"I'm a reavin', I'm a rovin',

I'm a rairin' young blade,

Oh-h, I clim up Pike's Peak

And I set in the shade."

Ared had heard the cowboys, who drove Texas cattle up to Oklahoma for the spring grass when he

was a boy, sing to the same tune, long and rambling songs like that. He believed the old man must have been a ranch cook in his day, or perhaps a cowboy, for he had the quaver, and the nasal turn, and the long sustained notes at the end, in their accepted style.

"Dad-bust the luck, I know that bacon's a-burnin' by the way it smells!" said he, close on the recitation of his feat against Pike's Peak.

Ared lit a lantern and went over.

"Thanks, friend," said the old man; "I'm out of oil, but I thought I could git supper before dark come. I could 'a' et it any time, for I know the road to my mouth."

"It's a path we're all familiar with," said Heiskell.

"Wisht I could forgit that trail for a month or two at a stretch sometimes—it'd be a savin', I'm here to say, stranger."

Ared raised a doubt, and the old man laughed.

"No, of course not," said he. "There's just two kinds of men in this world; them that eats to live and them that lives to eat. I belong to the last outfit. I'd 'a' went for oil before this but I've got a sick man in the tent there that I had to look after. He's asleep now. He drops off when I tune up my spout and sing."

"Anything serious?" Ared inquired.

"Well, yes, I might say it is serious, pardner," said the old man, pausing in his work of forking the bacon from the pan, the fork clenched in his

hairy fist, his big eyebrows drawn down in concentration, his sharp face set in serious lines. His hat was pushed back, and the lantern light struck him fairly, picking out his points like the high lights in a painting. He was a range man, all over. Long, lean, dry; sharp-eyed, grey-moustached, brown as the bacon in his pan.

He resumed his cooking, moving his coffee pot from the coals, turning his corn pone out on the palm of his hand, and blowing the ashes from its crust.

"Yes, I might say it's about the worst thing that a man can take," he continued, shaking his head sadly.

"What is it?" asked Heiskell, thinking of small-pox.

"Booze," said the old man. "It's got Purty down, hog-hobbled, and branded in forty places. It's struck to his brains; he's got the Lonesome Willies."

"Oh well, he'll get over that," said Ared, with the lightness of one inexperienced.

"Yes, this time he will," assented the old man, rising from his squatting posture before his little fire, his meal being ready. "You're the feller that bought that outfit over there?" said he, jerking his head toward Ared's quarters, sliding his hands down his overalls to remove the grease, and then offering the right one in friendliness. "My name's Jeffries, but nobody don't call me by it but Uncle Sam when he sends me my pension voucher," said he, as they shook hands. "I'm known from the Nueces to the

North Platte as Triggerheel, and you're at liberty to call me that if you like it better."

"My name is Heiskell, and I'm glad to know you, Mr. Jeffries," said Ared. "I smelt you out for a cattleman when I heard you singing."

"Yes, I've driv from Texas to Montana in my time," the old man said, with the pride that every cattleman who followed that long trail discovers in his voice when he speaks of it.

"Eat your supper—I'll come back afterwards and we'll have a chat," said Heiskell.

"If you'd be so kind and obligin'," the old man said, "I'd like to git you to stay here with Purty a little while till I run over to the store and git a can of oil."

Ared returned when he saw the old man toss his knife and fork into the frying pan and throw the grounds out of the coffee pot. The old man was taking up his song again, to cover the clatter of storing his unwashed tinware away in his box.

"I'm a reavin', I'm a rovin',
I'm a rairin'——"

"Ye-es, damn you, ye-es, damn you!" sounded a voice out of the tent.

Triggerheel took the lantern, leaving his song suspended there as if he meant to return presently and resume it, and went into the tent. Heiskell had approached, and could see within through the open

flap. The alcoholic patient was sitting on a mattress spread on the ground, propping himself up with unsteady arms. He appeared to be many years younger than Triggerheel, but he was dishevelled and drink-parched, and his moustache drooped sickly in the fire of his inflamed face. His hair stood out on forty ways, his eyeballs were distended, his aspect savage and uncompromisingly mean.

"Gimme my gun!" he demanded, fixing his glistening eyes on Heiskell, who had stopped in the tent opening. "Gimme my gun—I'll blow a hole in him as big as a tub!"

"Now, Purty, you lay down and keep still," soothed Triggerheel, pressing him gently backward.

Purty was in that state where all men looked to him like foes, and his bloody desire was to make holes in everybody.

"Ye-e-es, damn you!" said he, tremblingly, like the bleat of a sheep. He turned against his friend, and tried to strike him with his open claws, with a sudden vicious swipe, like a cat aiming at an insect flying past.

Triggerheel, taking advantage of the disturbed pose, flipped his charge down to the mattress and held him there with one hand, while he fumbled under the pillow of folded blankets with the other and brought out a hairbrush. With this he began stroking Purty's limp moustache. Under this remarkable treatment, which was eased of its ridiculous

aspect in great measure by the old man's earnest tenderness, Purty closed his eyes and relaxed in contentment. Presently he was sleeping again.

"That always soothes him," said the old man, putting the brush away under the blanket. "He's gone back to sleep, and I'll take the can and lope over to the store for some oil. If he wakes up, you just put your knee on his chist and bresh his murstash that-a-way."

Triggerheel went out, leaving the lantern beside his patient. Heiskell was afraid to trust the flame in such proximity with the alcoholic distillations which stewed out of Purty's open mouth. He removed it to the door, and sat near, disgusted with the filthy creature on the pallet.

Purty was twitching and yelping in his sleep like a dreaming dog. Soon he was sitting up again, looking about him in strange wildness. He centred his staring gaze on Heiskell presently, and began his querulous demand for his gun.

"Ye-e-es, I know you; I know you!" said he, with barroom ferocity. "Gimme m' gun—I'll blow a hole in 'im as big as a tub!"

Heiskell was not moved by compassion. He had no intention of applying the remedy of pacification as directed by Triggerheel. He felt that a few buckets of cold water would be a saner and more fitting rectifier, with more sanitary and lasting results. Purty began to show a disposition to get up and search for the mighty weapon which was not forth-

coming on demand. As Heiskell felt that he had assumed a certain responsibility for the fellow's safe-keeping until Triggerheel's return, he went in, flung Purty roughly back to his pillow, and placed the hairbrush in his hand.

"Here, brush your bristles, you hog!" said he.

Purty began stroking the long hairs which fringed his lip, groaning dismally, his staring eyes on the ridgepole. When Triggerheel came back a few minutes later, he was asleep.

Heiskell put the brush in its place under Purty's head, and joined the old man beside his rekindled fire.

"Purty ain't his lawful, tax-payin' name—if he had any taxes *to* pay," Triggerheel explained. "It's Purdom, but down in Taixas they all call him Purty. It's a name that's stuck to him ever since he was a boy, and I reckon always will."

"It seems strangely inappropriate right now," Heiskell said.

"You're right," nodded the old man, "Purty he ain't much of a sight for the ladies now, and he ain't much better when he's up and a-goin', neither. He's cross-grained and onery, and he'd steal the coppers from a dead nigger's eyes. Just as like as not he'll git up in the night, with his head clear enough to know where he's at and what he wants, and go through my pockets and light out. He has done it, more times than one. It's a streak that runs in Purty, and he can't help it."

"Well, why don't you kick him out?" asked Heiskell, amazed.

"Well, I'll tell you," said the old man, slowly, beating the fire with a sprig of buck-bush. "Purty he's collectin' a debt off of me that I'll never be able to pay back, maybe, as long as I live. That boy saved my life one time. Maybe it wasn't much to save—I reckon you'd find people in the world that'd tell you that—but, such as it was, it was kind of handy to me."

"Yes, it takes a good deal to offset a debt like that," Heiskell admitted, reflectively, standing by with his lantern in his hand.

"It does so," said the old man. Then, quickly: "You'll be goin' in for drillin' with that there outfit you bought?"

"That's my intention," Heiskell returned.

"I'd like to hire out to you to do your tool sharpenin' and haulin' of coal and water and what you'll need," put in the old man. "Somebody'll have to do it, and I've got as good a span of horses as they can hitch up in this country. And I reckon you'll find me a right smart of a blacksmith when it comes to p'intin' a drill."

"I'll be glad to give you the work the minute I land a contract, Mr. Jeffries, but I don't know how soon that will be."

"Not long," the old man assured him. "They tell me they're beggin' for drillers back in the Big Pool. The man that owned the outfit you bought

was makin' a good thing out of it. I hauled for him, so I orto know."

"Then the job's yours," promised Heiskell, "if your friend don't wake up feeling that he needs a horse and ride one of yours away."

"Well, he might," allowed Triggerheel, after giving the thought due reflection, "but I don't reckon he will. He never done that bad to me yit. Now, there he goes—wakin' up ag'in!"

As Heiskell went back to his tent he heard the old man's quavering tune rise again, following the lead of his interminable song. He was inside the tent with Purty, the light of his lantern yellow through the worn canvas, and his words came forth softened and mellowed of their harsh, range twang:

"Oh, the cuck-oo's a pur-ty bird,
And she brings us good ch-ur,
But she nev-er sings cuck-o-o-o
Till the spring of the yu-r-r-r."

CHAPTER V

THE LADY ENTERS

TRIGGERHEEL came over the next morning sometime after breakfast, the lower part of his face where he had shaved off his bristling beard as fresh and clean as a scalded hog.

"Well, Purty, he up and left me last night," he reported, with unmistakable lightness and relief in his manner.

"Did he take anything with him this time?" Heiskell inquired, with interest.

"I kind of held out on the boy this time," Triggerheel confessed, a little flush of shame spreading over his weathered face, "and I only left six bits in my pocket. I had the rest of it hid in a sack of oats. I feel kind of sneaky over it, too—reckon I ortn't 'a' done it, the boy may go hungry before he strikes anything."

"Mr. Jeffries, with all due respect to your feeling of gratitude for what he did for you in the past, I can't see how you can feel any disturbance of conscience over holding out on a fellow like that."

The old man looked at him queerly, with something deep in his eye which seemed a warning, his

head cocked to one side in attitude of respectful attention.

"I'm his friend, no matter what he looks like to anybody else," said he.

Heiskell noted that the old man delicately relieved Purty of any responsibility toward him. The friendship was on one side, only. It was his obligation.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jeffries," Ared said, as gravely as he felt.

Triggerheel held out his hand. They shook, solemnly. Triggerheel sighed, and brought out his pipe, as if comfortable in having missed a rock which might have wrecked his new-promised friendship at the beginning.

As he tamped the tobacco dust from the bottom of his pouch into the pipe with his thumb he looked up, a wrinkling of humour around his clear, blue, bright eyes.

"I wish you wouldn't refer to me as mister," he requested. "I tell you, son, every time you say that word it makes me feel uncomfortable, like I did the time I went to the Cattle Growers' Convention at Kansas City in a *see*-ment shirt."

"In what?"

"Well, I always call 'em that. They're as hard as *see*-ment. One of them big white fellers, I mean, like you've seen men bore diamond studs into. Yes, I wore one of 'em, and I set up three nights in a cheer in the Coates House up there in Kansas City

and didn't git enough sleep to do a pe-rairie wulf. Ever-which-way I turned that blame thing bent in on me. I felt like I was in a coffin."

Triggerheel laughed over the unpleasant recollection.

"Why didn't you go to bed?" Heiskell asked.

The old man stayed his hand, a burning match between his fingers, on its way to his loaded pipe, amazement in his eyes. He stood so until the match burned up to his fingers, and died out unfelt against the hard skin.

"I'd like you to p'int out the man that could sleep in a bed with one of them *see*-ment shirts crackin' and rattlin' around him!" said he.

"Well, you could have taken it off," Heiskell said, in the most matter-of-fact way.

The old man struck another match, lit his pipe, got it well under way.

"I reckon so," he admitted. "I never thought of doin' that. I've always slep' in my shirt, and I guess I al-ways will. Well, what I started to say was that if you don't like the name of Triggerheel, call me Jeff—short and sweet, as the man from Indyanny said."

Heiskell laughed.

"I don't object to Triggerheel, if you don't," said he.

"Not me," declared the old man. "It's a kind of a distinction, you might say; I don't reckon there's erry other man in the world named that."

So it was arranged; nothing but familiar names were to stand between them in their informal intercourse. Heiskell felt a singular confidence in the old fellow. It seemed that he must have known him years instead of hours, perhaps because there was so little of his frank old soul tucked away out of sight of the trafficking world around him.

Heiskell told Triggerheel that he did not expect any return from his advertisement before the next morning. In consequence, he did not remain close in camp that day. His inclination bent him toward a visit to the deserted house in the hills, and as there was a melancholy pleasure in following it, he spent the greater part of the afternoon around the homestead.

Everything remained as he had left it the day before. His father had not returned, there was not even the footprint of a curious stranger in the dust before the door. Ared found that his interest in their crude, but efficient—until its day of collapse—drilling machinery had been revived. Through the years which he had lived by it in its inactivity he had experienced several gradations of emotion when he looked down from the hill upon the rusting monuments of their long and unrewarded toil.

At first, the sight of the machinery had stirred the waters of regret, darkling over his soul with sighs for the wasted money and toil. In time the sharpness passed out of that aspect of it, and only the folly of the stubborn search rebuked him humiliatingly.

That wore out in the rubbing of years, also, and gave way to indifference.

Now he stood by the rusty little engine, with its cracked cylinder and encrusted joints, marvelling over the tremendous things his father and himself, a green-boned, big-jointed youth, had accomplished on that bleak hillside. He recalled the glow of hope which animated him through those long and barren days, false lure that it was, which made him reluctant to give over the work at nightfall, and urged him to it fresh and eager with the dawn.

A few feet deeper—nay, perhaps one foot, or the fraction of a foot—might reward them with the wealth of their tenacious dream. Just a foot deeper, another hour of strain and stimulating expectancy, and the happy stream might pour, making every stone of their hills worth its weight in gold. To-day's unfilled yearning, when darkness settled and the throb of the drill was still, passed on into to-morrow's desire. There were no ashes on the hearth of ambition in those young and eager times.

Curiously now, with a moving pain of old regrets and old hopes, he looked over the drill swinging from the tall, gaunt derrick, and the great drum rolled with its half mile of heavy rope. Old Solomon had kept a tarpaulin over the tackle all those years, and the line was as strong now as on that day when the little engine stopped on its unfinished stroke. It still sustained the ton-weight string of drilling tools, which had slowly worn its way down

through the ribs of the earth. The drill swung there as they had hoisted it on the last day of their endeavour, its point over the mouth of the well, which Solomon had kept carefully covered, hanging as true as if it had been drawn up from its deep gnawing but an hour before.

The old man had been careful to keep it so, Ared knew. He knew that every warping of sun and weather in the timbers of the derrick had been adjusted week by week, and that every settling had been shored up to level, as true as a line. It was the old man's hope to hear the muffled thumping of that great instrument deep in the vitals of the earth again one day. To that end he had lived prepared. What of that long-held hope to-day? Did he carry it with him in his wandering, or had he put it away, like a dead thing, which no loving fondling ever would warm to life again?

And his own adventure—how would it meet his expectations? Better, hoped Ared, than this misdirected delving, which seemed so colossal to-day as to be above the might of two unaided men. They had wrought like giants there, and they had fared like mice.

Well, maybe, this new enterprise of his own would not turn out better. But at the worst, it could not yield more disappointment. Past failure had not disinherited him of present hope and future speculation.

Triggerheel was waiting for him beside the newly-

acquired drilling machinery when he returned to his camp on the widow's lot toward evening.

"Lady here to see you," said he. "She'll be back."

"A lady to see me?" asked Ared, his heart leaping like a trout. "Who was she—what was she like?"

What, he wondered, could have brought *her* back? Of course it must be she—his experience did not admit any other lady, and his imagination was not elastic enough at that moment to include anybody else.

"I didn't ask her who she was," said Triggerheel, smiling in good humour, "but I reckon I can give you a runnin' description of her colour, age and p'int. I'd judge she was about sixteen hands high, what you might call bal'-faced, clean-limbed, and a dark sorrel. I'd judge her to be about twenty-five, but she might run thirty-two."

"Oh," said Ared, his wonder increasing, "I don't know her. What did she want—or did she say?"

"I reckon she wants a well drilled, son," said the old man, a bit haughtily. It passed him why anybody should raise his feathers and get excited over a woman. But his eyes softened as he said: "Maybe you was expectin' somebody else?"

"No, I can't say that I was," blushed Ared. In a case like that, there is a very wide latitude between expectation and hope.

He hadn't considered a woman wanting a well drilled. But when he came to thinking of it now, he

saw that women must be included in the business calculations of the hour. He had heard of several widows and spinsters who were managing their own rich estates there, some of them squaws with foreheads no deeper than a thumb-nail.

He regretted that he hadn't thought to make himself more presentable to receive prospective customers. He still wore his high boots and old grey coat, with the belt around it like a peasant's smock. His hat was greasy and old, also, and his hair wild and wind-blown. Only his face had the service of the razor every day, but aside from that one detail of neatness, he was rough and rustic, and uncouth to look upon.

He was long in the arms and legs, and his ascetic, studious face gave him the appearance of some scholarly recluse who had just stepped out of his retreat. But his calm eyes and his deliberate, slow speech were checks against the impression of unfitness which his general appearance was likely to inspire. They were not the eyes of a man who dreamed in vain, nor the speech of one who wasted his years in lamentations, or in building idle walls of words.

"Well, she was a peart and frisky lookin' little lady, if you'll take an old feller's word for it," said Triggerheel. "She 'peared like she could jump a six-rail fence and never—sh-h-h-h! Here she comes."

She was dressed in a corduroy riding habit, visibly and pantaloonishly divided of skirt, with rows of

large, cloth-covered buttons down the outer seams. Her low-crowned felt hat, broad-brimmed, leather-banded, bore plain proof that it was not a flighty bit of trickery, to be worn once in a while. It was greasy, and dented, and rain-beaten, and that part of her habit which came in most intimate contact with the saddle was worn as sleek as the keel of any cowboy's trousers between Oklahoma and the Gulf.

She was an out-of-door woman, of an out-of-door country. The vigour of it was in her stride, and the pliant freedom of her uncorseted waist. Her hair, which Triggerheel had described as "dark sorrel," was not far from his classification of colour. It was tinted like the frost-stricken leaves of the scrub-oak trees on Ared Heiskell's hills. It was nested in a low, great coil upon her neck, out of the way of her hat, and against the clearness of her skin it was like the russet oak leaves, clinging pertinaciously against season and storm, above the snow.

"I am Miss Ryland, of seven miles south," said she, before she had come to a stand, "and I'm here to talk business, if you're the man who owns the drill."

"Heiskell is my name, and I'm the man," he said, taking off his hat, standing by deferentially with it in his hand. He had no half-way measures for a lady and, although he was quite unconscious of it, his appearance profited by the removal of his flapping old headgear just about one hundred per cent.

"I know—I saw the name in your advertisement," she told him, with an impatient wave of the hand, as if brushing away some trivial and unnecessary thing. Then she seemed to catch herself up, as if conscious of some unmannerly breach, and faced him with a queer little smile of wistful appeal. It apologised for her, and seemed to tell him that her brusqueness was not her manner, that it was only assumed for the occasion of business.

"I have come to you with a proposition, Mr. Heiskell," said she, meeting his eyes honestly, throwing off her business mask and speaking with a natural sincerity.

"I'll be glad to hear it, Miss Ryland," he encouraged.

"It's just this way," she began, her words gathering way, the brown depths of her pellucid eyes brightening in her kindling animation, "I want a prospect well drilled—several of them, maybe—but I haven't any money to pay for the work. Whoever undertakes it must have courage and confidence enough to gamble on the future and take his pay out of what he finds. I've got a lease on what I know to be one of the richest forties in the whole Big Pool district. Do you want to hear any more?"

Triggerheel had drawn out of hearing distance, with that delicacy which is no unusual attribute of rough-barked men of his kind. Miss Ryland looked curiously at Heiskell, who seemed momentarily unconscious of her presence. He was gazing toward

the hills, but she could not know that he was turning over in his heart the pages of his past account with chance. All she could make out of it, very likely, was that he was a most extraordinary driller.

"Do you want to hear any more?" she repeated, her voice dropping hopelessly.

Heiskell started, and spoke a quick apology.

"Certainly, I want to learn the entire particulars—I am greatly interested," he declared.

"It seems like when you've got a proposition that there's anything in," said she, a shadow of bitterness behind her words, "that it's the hardest thing in the world to get anybody to see it with you."

"I understand," he nodded, thinking how she used that word of the promoters, "proposition," in the same glib manner as his father. He also found his thoughts running out on the back trail of the old man's dream, and his long and persistent endeavour to make others see his "proposition" with the eyes of his own peculiar faith. Perhaps this girl, with the brown of clear agate in her eyes, and the eagerness of her belief in her uplifted chin and hearty, glowing cheeks—perhaps she, also, was wearing her soul out on the lure of a false and treacherous thing.

"You're not like other men with drilling machinery that I've approached on this matter," she told him, "and I'm glad to meet a man with above three hundred words in his vocabulary in this money-blind country at last. Maybe I can make you understand, Mr. Heiskell"—she said it appealingly, and there

was something in her eyes which seemed to plead—"maybe you're the man to put it through."

"If you will tell me," he suggested, patiently. "Are you going it alone?"

"Yes, quite alone," she answered, softly, with drooping head. "Father died five months ago. He held this lease on forty acres of the Earnshaw property south of here—perhaps you know where it is?"

"I know the property very well," said he.

"Father was among the early speculators in this field," she went on, "and he made a fortune before the others got fairly under way. Then he lost it in fruitless explorations, all but the lease that has come down to me. I'm not trying to lure you on, Mr. Heiskell, when I tell you that he refused fifty thousand dollars for it a week before he died."

"He should have taken it," said he.

"I don't know," she demurred, "one well is worth more than that. The big people own the leases all around me, and they've put down wells as close to the line as they can be drilled, and are pumping out my oil in their truly-Christian way. There isn't one of their wells that hasn't yielded more than fifty thousand dollars already."

"I was thinking aloud, and prompted by certain experiences in my own past," said he. "Your father doubtless was right. How long does your lease run?"

"It expires on the first of February—less than two months, unless I bring in at least one producing

well before that time," said she. "That's why I'm uneasy. If I develop one producing well by then, I have the option of renewing for five years."

She turned to him, suddenly, stretching out her hands earnestly.

"Mr. Heiskell, if you knew all that has been plotted and schemed against me, and all that has been thrown in my way of getting anybody to come in and develop this lease on shares, you'd begin to believe that it had a value back of it. Big as the plain evidence on all sides proves it to be, I haven't been able to get one driller to go into it with me. They've been bought off, or bluffed out, or managed somehow. They'll not touch it. The big company wants that land, and it seems determined to get it. If my hands can be tied a few weeks longer, I'm out."

"It seems a small piece of business for a concern like that to stoop to," said he. "I'd like to be able to save that lease for you, Miss Ryland."

"If you'll take up this proposition with me, Mr. Heiskell," she said, lifting her hand as if to lay it on his shoulder in her earnestness, "I'll share it with you as liberally as the generosity of your act deserves. I'll give you a fourth interest in the lease, and all the returns rising out of it. Is that any inducement?"

"I think you are over-liberal," said he, generously. "I'll get a horse from my friend over there and ride out with you this evening to look over the ground."

She thanked him, her face beaming with pleasure.

"The moment I heard you speak I thought you'd understand!" said she.

"I've been throwing dice with fortune many a long year now," said he, turning away to go for the horse, "and I haven't lost either my spirit or my faith, although my winnings have been pretty slim. I'll be ready in a minute."

She watched him while he crossed the lot to Triggerheel's camp in long, undulating strides. He was not a graceful man, and beauty was no part of him, taken in the rough all through. But he was extraordinary, in some yet undefined way. She felt it, with a lifting thrill. He was not the man she had expected to meet as the owner of a drilling outfit, but he was satisfactory beyond her most extravagant hope. He was the kind of a man, somehow, thought she, who walked into a woman's life, and shut the door.

CHAPTER VI

A TOUCH OF OLD-STYLE

WHEN Heiskell rode back to Oil City the town was through its supper. Its inhabitants, sated and glowing, thronged the sidewalks and ran in streams along the roadway of the street. The gnawing of saws and the beating of hammers continued into the night in the unceasing preparation of those who were fending against the coming storms of winter, and over the moving, unfinished scene the strident light of hundreds of electric lamps was cast.

Where gas was almost as plentiful as air, few used it in their shops and stores for light. The electric light factory had gas engines for running its dynamos, and the current of electricity which gas created thus was sold at a fancy figure. Only the poor and the parsimonious used gas in Oil City for their lights. Society's gradations, markings and distinctions, were measured by the number of electric bulbs in a merchant's window, the size of the gaudy "electrolier" on the table in his newly-plastered dining-room.

Heiskell delivered the horse to Triggerheel, and

before the old man had time to question him in regard to his investigations—if, indeed, that was his intent—clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly way and said:

“I believe we’ve struck a good thing. We’ll move the outfit over to the new field of fortune in the morning.”

After Heiskell had thrown a bit of supper together for himself, the old man came over and stood beside his fire.

“I was just startin’ out to take a look around for Purty,” he said. “I’d hate for anything to happen to the boy, and I’d like to see where he’s landed before I move over there to the field. Wonder if you’d care to mosey around with me a little?”

“I’ll be glad to stretch my legs,” said Heiskell, getting up.

“I don’t reckon the world’d git off of the hinges if I never run acrost Purty no more,” said Triggerheel, “but I kind of feel like I orto keep m’ eye on him when I can.”

“I understand how you feel about it, no explanation is needed of your interest in him,” Heiskell assured him, in friendly voice.

Triggerheel was smoking his old cob pipe, an immense black thing, burned thin around the crater, and flavoured with all the acrid settlings of the vicious brands of tobacco that he had tamped in it for many an unrelieved year. It was so heavy that the old man had to support it with one hand under the

bowl as he walked, or run the peril of having it jolted out of his mouth by a jog in the uneven ground.

"We'll have to make a round of the swill-stores," said Triggerheel, "for them's about the only places that Purty patronises. When booze gits its hooks into a man, seems like nothing can pry it loose no more. That Purty was one of the straightest boys that ever rode fence when him and me we first run into each other up in the Panhandle."

"I'm sorry if I did him a wrong in my hasty judgment," Heiskell said, with a skin-deep show of sincerity that he did not feel at all.

"You didn't," said the old man, heartily. "Purty he's just as low and onery as you took him to be. He's just the same to everybody—but me. I'm the only one that knows there's one little aidge of white left on his pore, damned soul. I reckon he'll waller that off in the mud some time, and then——"

Triggerheel made an eloquent flourish with his pipe. They walked on in silence a little way, until they came to the first saloon on that side of the street.

"We might as well take 'em up one side and down the other," said the old man.

Heiskell agreed to the wisdom of the plan, and they explored the place. The man whom they sought was not among the smoking, smelling, stewing crowd within. Triggerheel emptied his lungs with a sound like a swimmer coming up from a long dive, and

drew a long breath when they were in the clean air again.

"Saloon men build faster and better than anybody else in a new town," he remarked, looking back at the low brick structure which they had quitted. "I've always noticed that, everywhere I've went. Look at the lights they string up over their fronts, too—to draw bugs."

"Yes, it looks like easy money to the man on the outside," Heiskell said.

"I hope it rests as easy in their craws as it comes to 'em," said Triggerheel, doubtfully. "Well, we have to have all kinds of things in this world—we have to have rattlesnakes. But I don't know what they're for, do you?"

Heiskell admitted that he didn't, and that brought them to the Midland Hotel, which maintained the most exclusive bar in the town.

"Not much use lookin' in there for him, but you never can tell what kind of runnin' mates booze is goin' to hitch up," said Triggerheel. "Purty he's made up with summer glove fellers several times since I've been keepin' my eye on him. We'll just take a squint in, anyhow."

It sounded like there might be a college football celebration under way in the Midland bar. There was a boisterous gale of song swelling within as they pushed the easy-swinging door, which turned suddenly into a barking chorus of cheers.

"Sounds like some of them Harvard-Yale fellers

that gits loose and wanders off once in a while," said Triggerheel, standing with his hand on the door, as if hesitating about pushing the investigation in that quarter any farther. The room was hidden by a tall screen which served its purpose when the door swung open in summer weather. The riot of noise sank into a comparative calm for a moment, and somebody was calling on the house to step up and drink.

"If Purty's there, that's his chance," grinned Triggerheel. "We'll look around the corner and see."

A crowd of young men, ten or twelve in number, seemed to have the centre of the stage, and they were making the most of it. They ranged along the bar, arms on each other's shoulders in a continuous chain, and sent up their college song again.

The central figure of the celebration appeared to be a young man of stocky build who stood behind the line of his fellows, waving his hat in an all-including invitation to come forward and drink. He was dressed in a worn and saddle-polished pair of leather chaps, with a broken fringe of thongs along their seams, a blue flannel shirt, stained by sun and rain, high-heeled boots, spurs; around his neck a soiled red handkerchief was carelessly knotted, the peak of its folded corners in front. His hat was brown and battered, circled with a band of Mexican carved leather, and the leather cuffs about his wrists were similarly adorned. A pistol hung in the low-dangling holster on his leg.

The whiteness of his hands, the ruddy freshness

of his face, and the stiff manner of handling his feet in the forward-tilted boots, seemed to betray him for an actor who had stolen the part. If he ever had ridden a mile of fence—for cowboys are only fence-riders now—it must have been under an umbrella, and on a cloudy day.

Triggerheel was struck speechless with amazement at the strange combination of archaic outfit and pinkly-modern boy. His mouth opened, slowly, in measure with the distention of his eyes, and he turned his head from side to side in bewildered questioning, as if appealing to somebody for the answer.

"Come up and take one on me, everybody in the house," invited the youth, waving his hat as if to scoop them under the wing of his hospitality.

The few amused spectators in the room who had no part in the celebration grinned to each other and lined up at the bar. The pink cowboy turned to Triggerheel and his friend.

"Come on, boys," said he. "This is my night to roar—turn me loose!"

"Well, somebody wake me up!" said Triggerheel, fairly stunned.

The line of boosters at the bar faced about, glasses in hand, and began it over. A look of pain came into Triggerheel's face, such as a man discovers when he must bear a thing out of adjustment with the time and place, which he is impotent to set right.

"Let's git out of here," said he.

They turned to leave.

"Here, my friends are drinking with me," called the young man in the old-time outfit, "and anybody that refuses to drink isn't my friend! What're you gentlemen goin' to take?"

"Sonny," said Triggerheel, kindly, "I ain't touched a drop of liquor in thirty years. I come in here with my friend lookin' for a feller, and not to take a drink of any man's liquor, and when I refuse to drink with you it ain't because I hold you in any less respect."

"That don't go!" declared the youth, slapping his leg with his hat.

His friends gave him a grunting, growling, chopped-up cheer, such as animates the fictive hero on the football field.

"If a man ain't my friend, he's my enemy!" said the spurred and pistoled young man.

"And that's no lie!" chorused the line at the bar.

"You'll either drink or dance!" announced the mock cowboy, pulling out his pistol with a reckless sling.

Heiskell and Triggerheel had been moving toward the door. Already Heiskell was at the corner of the screen, the old man a few feet behind him. The pink desperado did not seem at all concerned whether Heiskell remained or left, but he was set in his intention to exact tribute from the old man. The rest of the noisy crowd added their clamour to the young man's demand. Triggerheel stopped, with no little show of dignity, and Heiskell, feeling

that he was deserting his companion in a moment of stress, went back to him.

"Young man," said Triggerheel, "I ain't packed one of them things you're slingin' around there so careless in longer than I can recollect. I don't like to see a feller handle a six-shooter that way—it gives me a pain!"

"You don't know who I am!" said the young man, lifting his voice, which was as greatly inflamed as his face. "Well, I'll show you! I'm little Johnny Green from the North Fork of Hell River, and I eat fish-hooks with my pie! Dance, damn you, dance!"

He slung the fool pistol down to range near the old man's feet, and pulled the trigger. The bullet plugged the board not five inches from Triggerheel's toe, and the old man hopped back in alarm.

"Dance!" commanded the little play cowboy, shooting off another cartridge, the bullet striking this time between Triggerheel's feet.

Heiskell felt himself frothing with anger. He saw disks of green between him and the lights as he lunged forward and made one mighty, blind swipe at the melodramatic hero's head. The youth's comrades, awake to the folly of his display at last, interposed at the same instant, closing round him in a mass. Heiskell's long arm plunged among them, and his bony fist found another mark than the one at which he had aimed. The chap who innocently stood buffer to the blow grunted when Heiskell's fist

chucked the breath out of him, and he carried two down with him when he plunged, like a real football hero charging a line, into the bunch.

In the moment of confusion which fell upon the celebrants, Triggerheel caught Heiskell by the shoulder as he was following up the charge, and wheeled him quickly around toward the door. He pushed him forward, and followed after.

From the outside they heard the young man calling loudly for his gun, and the noise of scuffling, and the clatter of heels as they struggled. But nobody came after them, and Triggerheel faced back toward his camp.

"I'm sorry, but I believe I missed that little rat!" panted Heiskell.

"You did, son, but you handed it out like a man, and the feller that stopped it had it owin' to him, anyhow. Well, you can saw *my* leg off!"

The old man was walking forward rapidly, breathing hard, gritting his teeth like he had a mouthful of gravel. Heiskell was surprised at his agitation. He had not counted him the man to run away from trouble in any such evidence of panic as that.

"Are we going to give up the search?" he wanted to know.

"Right now we air," said Triggerheel. "I've got some pressin' business on hands right now, and Purty he'll have to wait, wherever he is."

The old man poled on toward his tent, saying no more, and Ared branched across to his own camp.

He was preparing to go to bed when Triggerheel hailed him from without.

Heiskell took up the lantern and went out. There was the old man, transformed. He was dressed in a pair of wrinkled and mouldy chaps, rat-gnawed and worn; a buckskin coat with Indian decorations in paint over the front of it; a hat that must have weathered the storms of a generation, and a pair of spurs with rowels so big that they dug into the ground at every step. Two great, black-stocked revolvers lay in the high-buckled holster, worn after the old style which has come down to the Texas Rangers of to-day.

"Son, I ain't had this rig on for twenty-odd years," said the old man, apologetically, "and I wasn't sure I had all of it in my chist. But I found it, and here I am. How do I size up?"

"You look like you'd won the right to wear the rig, anyhow," said Heiskell, making a mental picture of the difference between the genuine and the bogus which he had so lately seen.

"I guess I done it, son," said he, gently. "That feller took m' breath away. I was lost for a minute over there, and I didn't know how to act. I'm goin' over to square matters up now. Care to go along?"

Heiskell made no protest, no matter what his opinion was. It was the old man's business, and he saw at once that argument would not pierce very far into the calm which lay over Triggerheel's outraged, hidden feelings.

"Yes, I'll go along."

Triggerheel listened a moment at the door of the Midland bar. The merry gang was still there, and the cowless cowboy's voice was highest among the high. They were singing something in which the name of Old Wallie supplied the place of the beloved Alma Mater, which true college men are believed always to speak with reverence and emotion.

Triggerheel opened the door, Heiskell following. The roisterers had drawn to them several seasoned-looking young men, brown and whiskery, and spattered over trousers and laced boots with the churning from prospect holes. Heiskell knew them for the engineers in charge of the work back in the fields, for he had seen scores of their like out there, bossing gangs of bohunks around the wells, lines and tanks.

The ring of amused spectators had increased, also, as well as the number of those who attended to profit by the made-up cowboy's liberal hand. These stood back out of the mysteries of the initiated, licking dry lips in anticipation of the next treat.

The young man who had handled his weapon so carelessly had been invested with that tool again, and it swung as mightily as before in the holster against his fat thigh. He was standing on the foot-rail in front of the bar, in the office of choirmaster now, waving his romantic hat aloft. There was such an uproar coming out of them that none of them was

aware of Triggerheel's entry until he laid hold of the parading youth by the shoulder and hurled him to the floor with a bump.

The old man was standing there, when the startled crowd wheeled to see what had befallen their leader, his arms crossed in an easy, lounging attitude before him, a rusty revolver in each hand. He said nothing, but the look that he trained on them cooped the words in their mouths. It seemed as if they had sense enough to realise, above all the alcoholic valour that they owned, that they were face to face with the real thing.

For a moment or two Triggerheel froze them with his savage eyes. Old Wallie, the hero of the song, was sitting on the floor, his hat a rod beyond his reach, scrambling around his twisted gear for his gun. Triggerheel gave him no time to find it. He made an expressive motion toward the door with one able-looking six-shooter, and old Wallie headed that way with one pained, appealing look behind. The ruddy flame had sunk in his cheeks, which were now the colour of new cheese. At the corner of the screen he hesitated, fearfully.

"I beg your pardon, friend, but this is a kind of a rough joke——"

"It ain't no joke," reproved Triggerheel, waving him on.

The rest of the house, including the savant behind the bar, trailed out after them, big-eyed, silent. Nobody knew what was going to happen, and least of

all Old Wallie, the bad article from the cold tributary of Hell River.

In front of the door, under the bright lights, Wallie would have paused to protest. He even spoke briefly, in a very youngish and humble voice, making no mention of his valiant parts, and quite out of mind, apparently, of his weapon in the leather below his shaking hand. Triggerheel shut him off by a jolt in the ribs with the end of his rusty barrel, and urged him out to the middle of the bright thoroughfare.

It was a new show for the crowds which banked quickly on both sides of the street. Nobody interfered, but Heiskell noted that there was a quick laying together of heads among the young men who had been drinking with Wallie, and a hurried departure of three or four in various directions.

Triggerheel would not listen to Wallie, who seemed to be pleading now.

"I danced to your tune, pardner, a little while ago, and now you're a-goin' to dance to mine," Heiskell heard the old man say, his voice hard and unsympathetic.

"But you ain't—you ain't——"

"Yes, I am, I'm that same feller," cut in Triggerheel. "Git down on your hands and knees!"

The crowd pressed chins on the shoulders of those in front, leaning over in eager silence to see. Nothing like that ever had been seen in Oil City before. People were not certain whether it was something in

earnest, or an advertisement of somebody's smoking tobacco.

The young man stood like a horse in the street, and, using him like a horse, Triggerheel straddled him. The crowd came out of its wondering silence, and gave them a cheer, varied with shouted suggestions to the rider.

"Trot," commanded Triggerheel, raking his mount's fat thigh with his spur.

Perhaps the young man was sober by that time. Those who have experienced the two extremes say that such a thing is possible. He started off, weaving and staggering under the weight of the old man, and Triggerheel raised one gun and fired a shot up among the wires which netted the air above Broadway. That done, he lowered the weapon, and held the muzzle of it under the nose of his reluctant mount.

It was a little touch of the melodramatic which the mingled seed of the earth collected there appreciated fully. It touched something wild and romantic, and devil-splitting in their oily breasts. They whooped and capered, and flung their hands high in encouraging applause. If it was going to turn out an advertisement at last, it was a good one, and the sell of it wouldn't hurt.

Triggerheel emptied his six-shooters as his man-horse stumbled on, lowering his weapons after each shot, as in the first instance, and rubbing the smoking muzzle under Old Wallie's college nose. When

the last shot was discharged, Triggerheel gave his creature a parting rasp with his big spur, and a kick to lift his lagging spirits. Then he turned him loose to go his way.

Heiskell had kept pace with the remarkable parade, and now he joined Triggerheel as the old man returned to the sidewalk through the lane which the spectators opened for him in respectful admiration. Heiskell gave the old man his hand, and spoke in his ear.

"They've gone for the police and the sheriff and all the other peace officers in the county—hurry!" he said.

They turned from the street and made their way between buildings in the dark. As they came out in the open, a man stepped before them and lifted a short club, commanding them to stop, in low voice.

In the half-light which fell over the tops of the low buildings Heiskell saw the glimmer of a badge on his breast.

"I'm the chief of police," said the man. "Say, you give him what was comin' to him, all right, but you'll have to duck, and duck quick! I don't want to arrest you, old feller, but it'd be all my job's worth, and more, if Fleming was to find out I let you git away."

"Fleming?" repeated Triggerheel, as if he had heard amazing news.

"Sure, he's Fleming's nephew—come out here to break into business, and brought all his nice young

friends along to give him a send-off. But say, I tell you you'll have to duck!"

They went on, hurriedly, with thanks to the officer for his generosity.

"I'll change m' clothes and wash my face, as the feller said, and I reckon my own maw wouldn't know me if she met me afterwards," said Triggerheel. "And if it's all the same to you, I'll hitch up and haul that drill over to the young lady's lease to-night. If Fleming was to find out who broke his little nephew in to ride, I'd have to smoke for it, son."

"Fleming—who's Fleming?" asked Heiskell.

"Well, he's what you might call the big grunt around here, son. You must be a stranger in the Big Pool deestric' if you ain't never heard tell of Horace Fleming."

"On the contrary, I've lived here nearly all my life within a running jump of the site of this town, you might say. But I've been growing sheep back in the hills, and this business developed like a toadstool in the night right under my nose, and I knew just as much about it as a man in prison would have known up to a couple of days ago. I never heard of Horace Fleming. What is he—what does he do?"

"You're a funny kind of a feller," marvelled Triggerheel, "to live with all of this noise and combustion under your nose and never poke your head out of your hole. I heard of it away down in Zapatos county, Taixas, where they still vote for

Sam Houston. Well, Fleming he's president of the Plains Oil Company, as they call the branch of the big feller that operates in this state."

"Oh, I see," said Heiskell.

"Yes. If Fleming wants to make a man he can make him, and if he wants to shut him up in his hole and starve him out, he can come purty nigh doin' it, too. If he wants to run oil from a deestric' he runs it, and if he don't like a feller in there he shuts down on all of 'em and starves enemy and friend together till he fetches the man he don't like, or that's went agin him or the company in some way, down to his hunker-bones. Oil City's Fleming, and Fleming's Oil City. Maybe a man could breathe here without askin' him, but that's about as fur as he could go."

"It's all news to me," declared Heiskell, relishing the information as such.

"I used to know Fleming down around San Antonio when he sold bobwaar," said Triggerheel. "He's a great big man with t'backer on his mouth and cuss words jammed inside of him so thick they chock in his neck tryin' to git out sometimes. I reckon if he found out who it was that give his little relation a touch of old-style life he'd fix it up somehow so I'd go to the pen."

"He couldn't go that far, no matter what his influence in this little spot of the state may be," denied Heiskell. "Well, you hitch up and rack out with part of the machinery, so you'll have an alibi.

I don't believe anybody recognised you in that rig."

Triggerheel took off his belt and pistols as he walked on, removed his painted coat and wrapped them in it, together with his ancient hat.

"Well, Ed—" that was as close to the name Ared as he could drive—"I guess I raired up and made a fool of myself," said he, contritely.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Ared. "He'll not forget it in a hurry."

"Neither will Fleming," said Triggerheel, portentously, his hand on the flap of his tent.

CHAPTER VII

WORD FROM HEADQUARTERS

HEISKELL had assembled his machinery in a spot which he considered likely from every consideration. In the first place, it did not appear reasonable that a barren well could be put down anywhere within the borders of Josephine Ryland's lease, judging by the results which had attended drilling all around its edges.

The lease appeared to be, as she had declared it, in the very richest part of the great discovery. Derricks were as thick in the fields around it on every side as shocks of fodder in a cornfield, it seemed to one looking over the country from the eminence where the little plank house occupied by Miss Ryland and her mother stood. The big company had set itself, like a devilfish, to the work of sucking dry her possessions with a thoroughness as devoid of feeling or conscience as any of its notorious transactions in larger works of treachery and overpowering strength.

It seemed a trespass of meaner and more arrogant brutality than crossing over her confines and robbing her outright would have been. Its derricks

formed a fence almost around her line, and in the stretch where no wells had yet been brought in, a drill was at work seeking the hidden outlets of her buried wealth.

The sight of this unprincipled steal fired Heiskell's blood to the task which lay at his hand. Not alone for what victory would yield him, but in larger measure for the circumvention of the brutal covetousness of the gang which had blocked her previous efforts. Perhaps the big company would refuse to "run" their oil, as Triggerheel had said. That was only a present consideration. If he could bring in a well in the fifty days remaining her on her option, the five years' tenure which that would give her would bring a buyer for the lease at a price which would make both of them rich.

He had selected a spot where the fall of the land would make it easy to bank and conserve the output of a gusher, in the fortunate event of tapping the deposit at a point of high pressure. It was at the head of a ravine, a few hundred yards distant from the rough shelter which Ryland had built with his own hands on his last hope. The small bit of timber wick grew sparse and dwarfed along the sides of this draw was all that the place afforded.

"They know by this time that I've found somebody with courage enough to tackle the job," said Miss Ryland.

"We'll remove any lingering doubt in the morning when we begin to raise the rig," said he. "We'll

soon have the drill going. The boiler and engine are in first class shape, and we'll work day and night most of the time."

Triggerheel was putting up the tents, and the little camp looked all in a bustle. Miss Ryland was bright with the promise of these preparations. Her face had lost the strained tension which added unearned years to her appearance. She had left off the worn riding habit, and now was garbed in a soldierly-looking blue serge, with short skirt and trim jacket. She appeared very competent, and eager for the adventure.

Heiskell had put off his shepherd's raiment, as if divorcing himself from his past life altogether, and now appeared in the regulation uniform of the men who accomplished things in that country. He wore wide corduroy trousers, the legs of them folded inside his high, laced boots; a blue flannel shirt and duck coat. Only he clung to his old hat, which flapped its wings in every high wind like a melancholy old winter crow.

"I wish I could take hold and help you," said she, with a sigh for her own impotency.

"Your presence is an inspiration," said he, looking into her eyes frankly, the oil can in his hand poised over the cylinder cup; "you have been so courageous in the face of the enemy."

He waved the can to indicate the line of derricks which all but enclosed her parcel of land. The alert, questioning look which his manner of speech

had surprised into her eyes at their first meeting sprang there again. If he saw it he did not understand, for he smiled, in entire self-possession, as a pleasurable colour swept her cheeks.

"I've done the best I could," said she. "If I could have found a *man* before—they're such sneaks and cowards!"

"We'll get the rig up in a day or two, then we'll go after the juice," said he, passing over her bitter reflection, his hand on the coupling of the little piston, travelling with it on its short stroke.

He watched her as she went up the hill, her slender ankles, as trim as a doe's, twinkling below her skirt. But there was a look of abstraction in his eyes, as if, though focussed there, they saw something that was not, and had not been. He lifted the tips of his grimed fingers to his forehead, and touched it as if in salute. A shadow of a smile moved over his face, like the stirring of a gentle memory.

Heiskell sat close to his little fire, for the chill of winter was in the night, after Triggerheel had turned in, giving himself over to a new and pleasurable dream. In the old times—before the tragedy of the sheepfold—he had his romantic fancies, such as come to every young man in his day, but there never had been anything to rest them on save the nebulous shapes of desire. No woman ever had crossed his way and left her footprints in the dew of his morning. She of the adventurous night,

who had come, and sung, and departed, was the first.

Now he had given her place, he had exalted her, as men raise the image of God's mother beside their altars. Each is beautiful and holy in measure with the devotion of him whose hands place her in the consecrated niche. To Ared Heiskell this woman of the song had grown more dear in the few days which had passed since they met and parted, than the most treasured memory of his life.

Life had been enough, in the other days, with its speculations, its philosophical solutions, its plans that one could put ahead and revise from day to day. Now nothing sufficed, nothing explained, nothing allayed the burning of this new longing. Nothing would suffice, ever, but her lips; nothing would quiet but the lifting melody of her song. There was a new desire in his bosom; in his heart a great, white light.

Whatever he might do would be accomplished in his striving up to her; anything that he might build out of the material of life would be founded on his determination to lift himself above the unknown masses and gather her, from his eminence, against his breast. So he dreamed, and so he planned, and the strong desire of his heart reached out and sought her, like a groping caress.

There was no lure in other eyes, no meshes to entangle in other locks of barley-brown hair. He felt that he was richer in the one little kiss that she had

given him, than he would be if the labour which he was to begin to-morrow, should open the greatest gusher in the field.

Three days later the work was begun. Heiskell kept the drill going as long after nightfall as he felt his machinery would stand without an early breakdown.

"We'll keep threshing-machine hours," he told Josephine.

"We'll work from kin to kain't, as they say down in the cotton fields in Taixas," said Triggerheel, "meanin' from the time you kin see in the mornin' till you kain't see no furdur at night."

Progress was rapid through the earth and shale of the first few days. When they came down to the rock, said Triggerheel:

"We've hit the outside of the safe, and it won't be long till we bust it."

It was on that day that Josephine brought her mother down to see the drilling machinery and meet the driller. It was the first close sight of her that Heiskell had been accorded, although he had seen her from a distance as she sat at the window, looking down on the work.

She was a frail, thin woman, pale almost to translucence. Her large, childish blue eyes were young in her old face, and perhaps it was from them that she drew the belief that she was fresh and handsome. Youth seemed to have dried out of her, leav-

ing the skin of her face not wrinkled, but drawn tight, and in this shrunken framework her big eyes rolled and turned their full, firm globes, shining with all the lustre of her youth. She was painfully affected, and spoke with what seemed to be an acquired accent of the South.

She wondered and exclaimed over the machinery, holding her skirts tight about her wasted shanks.

"My do-tah tells me you're going to make us rich once mo'," she said, twisting him a smile. "When we lived in New *Aw-le-ans*——"

"Mother, Mr. Heiskell says the string of drilling tools weighs half a ton," interposed Josephine.

"Gracious! Can it be so?" wondered the old lady, patting the thin strand of hair which coquetishly concealed the top of her ear. It was faded hair, but not grey, nature having carried out its plan of withering her even to that digression from its established rule.

"Even then, ten feet through this flint that we've struck is a big day's work," he told her.

"Ten feet!" said she, in consternation. "Why, suh, it will take you a hun'ed days to go down a thousand feet, the depth my husband always said one must drill here to get a strong well. You'll have to has'en, Mr. Heiskell, or I and my do-tah will be ruined!"

"The average depth of the wells around us is only seven hundred feet," he said, his eyes finding Josephine's, in their strange, abstracted way.

"And we'll win," nodded Josephine; speaking to him, for him, alone.

He smiled, and placed his hand on the joint of the flashing little piston, as if encouraging a friend in some mighty labour.

"Yes, we'll win," he echoed, confidently, his strong face set in determined cast.

"It's a strange partnership that you two have entered into," simpered the old lady, looking at him archly, as if to discover to them both that she could see deeper than they supposed.

Josephine blushed, and plucked her by the arm.

"Oh, Jo, you red-ic'lous creature, I don't see *why!*" she giggled. "You must come up to dinnah with us this evening, Mr. Heiskell," she hurried on.

"Indeed you must, Mr. Heiskell," seconded Josephine. "We've been very stingy of our hospitality."

"Offer no apology—I am a stranger," said he, with a courtesy as deep and easy as the old woman's was artificial and strained.

"When we lived in New Aw-le-ans, where Mr. Ryland was edito' of a papeh, we entertained our friends deservingly," said Mrs. Ryland, shaking her head in sorrow for the days of magnificence.

So it came that Heiskell sat at supper with his partner and her mother that evening—for it is still supper in that country, and will remain supper against all innovations for many a long year to

come. There was moonlight afterwards, and a walk with Josephine.

Her hand was on his arm, and their shadows followed after them, like stalking giants, and they walked away from the world of dying options for a little while. It seemed that both of them welcomed this opportunity for stretching their minds out of the cramped turmoil of the past few days—for Josephine it had lasted months, indeed—and they talked of other things than oil wells, royalties, geological formations and the competition of the unfair and strong.

But, stray as they might from the matter nearest both their hearts, their feet seemed unconsciously to lead back to the scene of the exploration when they turned again home. Triggerheel was smoking by his little fire of coals. He rose, and made the deferential bow which he never neglected when Josephine appeared. After a few words with him they went on up the hill.

"He calls you Ed," said she half to herself, as if reflecting over it.

"He can't get around Ared," he told her, "and I can't blame him, either, it's a far-fetched name."

"He doesn't seem to be afraid of you, though," said she.

"Afraid of me?" he asked.

"I was," she told him, "at first. It was several days before I felt grown-up when I was around

where you were. You seemed so severe and dignified that I felt like a child."

"Oh, you shouldn't say that," he chided, in discount of himself.

"It's true, and mother had the same feeling. That's why I couldn't induce her to come down and get acquainted. But mother gets over things quicker than I do," she laughed, "she's on a footing of familiarity with you already."

"Well, if you can't be familiar, you can at least be unafraid," said he. "I never bit a young woman in my life."

Perhaps she wondered whether he ever had kissed one. It was but a logical speculation for a woman.

They had come to the door. He gave her his hand in formal good-night, and she retained it a moment, unconsciously maybe, her warm fingers clasping the tips of his own.

"Well, partner, I feel that I know you better than I did," said she, releasing his fingers, forcing a little laugh.

"Thanks, partner," said he, heartily.

There was implied confidence in her words, more intimate, more assured, than in anything that she had said or done since they tackled the job together. He felt warmed by it as he left her, and went down the hill thinking that Josephine was a nice, comfortable girl—for somebody. As for himself, he had resigned three hours to her which belonged to another. He wondered what song that other was

singing this night, and whether peace had dispelled the troubled fright out of her eyes.

Much more than this he pondered as he saw that the fire in the boiler was well banked for an early start in the morning. Josephine was as far out of his thoughts fifteen minutes after he parted from her at the door as if she never had come into his life at all.

Next morning the drill was going a little after dawn, and Triggerheel was on the road to Oil City after a load of coal. The old man had just drawn up to unload the fuel, on his return near noon, when he jerked his head toward the road.

"Feller comin' over from our neighbours," said he.

Heiskell looked.

"You're right," said he.

"Yes. It's that Harvard-Yale feller," said Triggerheel.

"It can't be!" Heiskell said, incredulously.

"You wait and see," said the old man, going ahead with his shovelling of coal from his wagon.

The visitor came on briskly, and Heiskell saw that Triggerheel had been correct in his long-range identification. It was the young man who had been broken in to ride by Triggerheel in the middle of Broadway, Oil City, not many nights past. He was dressed in the conventional corduroys and laced boots of the oil country, and he was plentifully splashed and begrimed. He marched up to the en-

gine where Heiskell stood, like a man with a purpose, and offered his hand.

"Sandford is my name, I'm engineer in charge of the work over the way," said he.

Heiskell met his friendly advance on like terms, and introduced himself. Sandford ran his eye over the machinery and nodded his approval.

"You've got a neat little outfit here, Mr. Heiskell," said he.

Heiskell said that it was carrying its part very well. He said as much to himself in regard to Sandford, who appeared to considerably better advantage than he did when Heiskell saw him last.

Sandford appeared to take a friendly interest in the work. He inquired how deep Heiskell had gone, his progress daily, and how far down he expected to drill. Heiskell told him that the job cut out for him was to get oil, and his intention was to hunt it in another place if he didn't strike it there within a reasonable depth.

"You'll get it at about eight hundred feet," predicted Sandford, "it's all under here, although we're doing the best we can to relieve the pressure for you."

He laughed over his joke.

"Miss Ryland ought to be collecting royalties from you every day," said Heiskell, not getting into the humour of the situation, somehow.

"I came over to ask you about the Rylands," said Sandford, unruffled. "I just learned yesterday that

the name of the lessee here was Ryland, and I wondered if by any chance it might be Ted Ryland's family?"

"I don't know, maybe there's a Ted, I never heard them mention him," Heiskell replied.

"He's dead, poor old chap," said Sandford. "We were at tech' together—he graduated a year ahead of me and meningitis took him while he was on his first job. He was an electrical engineer—died out in Omaha. Do you know whether they used to live in New Orleans?"

"Yes, the old lady often speaks of it," Heiskell nodded.

"Then it's the same family," Sandford declared. "That boy was like a brother to me. I'll have to go up and pay my respects."

He turned, after proceeding a few yards up the path toward the house, and came back.

"Oh say," said he, as if approaching an incidental which he had overlooked, "the old man—Fleming, you know, would like for you to stop in at the office and see him to-morrow."

After delivering this message, which doubtless was the objective of his visit, no matter for his attempt at nonchalance, he pursued his way to call on the Rylands, and renew his real or fancied acquaintance. Triggerheel, who had driven his team away and returned in time to hear the request of Fleming delivered, nodded his head knowingly, and winked.

"He didn't wait for yea, nay nor maybe-so," said

he. "The big grunt must be ready to talk business with you, son."

"Perhaps," said Heiskell. "He preferred starving Miss Ryland out, carrying on the feud against her that stood between him and Ryland. What do you think about it?"

"I think you'd better go," advised Triggerheel.

CHAPTER VIII

A HAND AT THE WINDOW

MRS. RYLAND was as excited over the visit of Sandford as if she had met an elephant. When Heiskell called in that night after the thumping drill was still, he found her dallying at the little round table at which she and Josephine had taken their tea. She greeted Heiskell effusively, and began at once unburdening herself of encomiums on Sandford's extraordinary parts.

"He reminds me so of Ted!" she sighed.

"Why, mother," protested Josephine, "he's nothing like Ted! He's as round as a doughnut, and Ted was tall, like Mr. Heiskell."

"In his presence, and his refinement, I mean, child," the old woman corrected. "One could tell, Mr. Heiskell, if he nevah spoke a word, that'd he'd been accustomed to the highest society. I think it was real nice of him to look us up that way."

"He brought me a message from his uncle," Heiskell nodded to Josephine.

The colour drained out of the young woman's cheeks.

"What does he want?" she asked, the shadow of old anxieties in her eyes.

"I'm commanded to appear at court before his majesty to-morrow," Heiskell replied, smiling as if he held the matter lightly.

"I expected to hear from him some way, as soon as he found out that we had a drill going here. If he'd been watching as sharp as he usually watches he'd have beaten me to you in the first place. Are you going?"

"I came up to talk it over," said he.

"If Mr. Fleming offers terms," said the old lady, eagerly, "you'd better accept. If your po' fatha hadn't been so blind to his family's inter-usts this qua'l nevah would have come down to us."

"He never offered us terms," said Josephine, "he wanted to strangle us for the spite that he nursed against our name."

"Oh, child, don't be too hawd on Mr. Fleming!" the old lady appealed.

"No, I'll give him all the credit he deserves," said Josephine grimly. "He's a good hater."

"I never have seen the man," said Ared, "but Triggerheel used to know him when he was a barbwire salesman in Texas. He gives him a rugged sort of reputation."

"I was goin' to speak to you about that Mistah Triggahheel," said Mrs. Ryland. "He makes me shuddah simply to look at him—he's such a desp'ate lookin' character, don't you think so?"

"On the contrary, he's as gentle as a woman," defended Ared. "I could tell you a story about his devotion to a worthless man to whom he feels himself indebted, which might soften your judgment of him, madam."

"No," protested Mrs. Ryland, flushing under her eyes, "don't attempt to defend the fellah to me, suh! I won't have it! I detest him, with that vulgah name, and I shall insist that you send him away from here at once!"

"Why, mother!" said Josephine, in unfeigned astonishment.

"He may be a murderer, child—he looks like it," said she.

Heiskell was moved only to smile by the old lady's sudden flash. He looked at her indulgently, as if he might follow it up by patting her head and soothing her with little words, like a child.

"Mother, I never knew you to show such sudden and peculiar prejudice against anybody before," said Josephine. "Triggerheel has nothing to do with us, nor we with him. He's Mr. Heiskell's——"

"Triggaheel, Triggaheel! There you go, speaking his horrid name familiarly. The very sound of it gives me creeps!"

"Jeffries is his name," Ared explained. "I don't know what the nickname means, nor how he came by it, at all. But he's a first-rate old codger, and I'm sure he never gave a woman, anywhere, any reason for being afraid of him. What do you

think," he turned to Josephine, "about going to see Fleming in the morning?"

"I think you'd better go, perhaps," said she.

"If he wants to talk business, he'd better understand at the beginning that there are two of us," he suggested.

"You mean I'd better go too?"

"You're the general, I'm only the fighting force," said he.

"No, I don't believe it's best for me to go," she answered, after pondering it a few moments. "If Fleming wanted to see me he'd have sent for me. He could have done that any time since father died."

"It seems so," nodded Ared, his head bent in reflection.

"Fleming is a heartless and unprincipled man," said Josephine, looking at him earnestly. "He got the impression that father tried to hold him up on this lease, and he told him he'd see that he never made a dollar out of it. Fleming has passed that word along to me, in more ways than one. He never forgave father because he out-generaled him in securing the government's approval of his lease ahead of him. This is Indian land, you know—the Earnshaws were Indians, and it belongs to minor heirs."

"Yes, I taught school in this district one term several years ago, and the little Earnshaws were among my pupils," said he.

While they talked, Mrs. Ryland drained the teapot into her cup and stirred and sipped the beverage

with apparent indifference to their discussion. She was wearing a loose-sleeved dress of youthful-tinted silk, doubtless a relic of the happy days in New Orleans. It was cut at least twenty years too low, and her poor old neck was as unlovely in its nakedness as a shorn and starving ewe's.

"Suppose that he wants to make terms?" suggested Ared.

Mrs. Ryland did not change her pose of indifference and lounging ease, her bony elbows on the cloth. But she rolled her big eyes, as the eyes of one moves who strains to listen, and the tinkle of her spoon against the cup was still.

"Yes, suppose he does," said Josephine, bending her eyes as in thoughtful calculation on the floor.

"What will the price of surrender be?"

Josephine looked into his questioning eyes.

"Mr. Heiskell, this lease is worth half a million dollars to Horace Fleming, or to anybody with capital to develop it, and the necessary pull with the big company for marketing the output. But we couldn't begin to ask that for it," she sighed.

"What have you thought of?" he inquired.

"I've never settled on a price, even in my own mind," she said. "Of course I've had my dreams—but I should say a hundred thousand. Is that unreasonable?"

The tinkle of the spoon on the teacup sounded again, as Mrs. Ryland dipped and poured, dipped and poured, and then lifted a spoonful to her lips.

"Not unreasonable, no. Shall I stand out for that?"

"Father paid twelve thousand dollars for the lease, for one year," said she. "Yes, I think we'd better stand for that."

"I'll go over in the morning and see what he wants," said Ared, rising to leave them.

"I do hope that you'll send that horrid Triggacheel man off," said Mrs. Ryland, rising and giving her hand, "as a special favo' to me, deah Mr. Heiskell."

"I'm sorry that you feel so strongly in the matter," Heiskell told her, "but I'll answer for Mr. Jeffries. He'll cause you no trouble, and your fear may be banished, madam. Miss Ryland and I need him, we hardly could get on without him."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Ryland, waving her hand as if to dismiss the subject. "It was such a *de-light* to meet Mr. Sandford to-day. While you two young people have been discussing business affaihs I've been dreaming of the past. It seems to me that Mr. Sandford's friendly call gave me a peek into the wo'ld I lost when we left New *Aw-le-ans* to hunt riches in this terrible, wild land. Don't you think Mr. Sandford has a most distinguished presence, suh?"

The question provoked a smile on Ared's serious face. He recalled the distinguished performance in which Sandford was a chief actor, which he lately had witnessed.

"He made quite a conquest of mother," said Jo-

sephine. "I was over in town this morning and came in just as he was leaving. Didn't he kiss your hand, mother, or was he trying to slip off your wedding ring?"

"Oh, Jo, you red-ic'lous thing!" giggled the old woman. Then, seriously: "You fo'get, do-tah, that he was our po' Ted's bosom friend!"

"But I don't forget that he's Horace Fleming's nephew, mother," the young woman answered, with significant gravity.

Heiskell had not overlooked that fact himself. He marvelled at the thrift of the breed. In the half hour that Sandford had spent with the old lady that morning, he seemed to have recruited her to the enemy's cause.

Josephine carried her good-night outside the door, and there she stood as he went down the path, looking after him as if the responsibility of his safe arrival at his quarters was part of her hospitable duty. Twice or thrice she reached out her hand to open the door, withdrawing it before it fell on the latch. When the shadows had swallowed him, and the sound of his feet passed on, she sighed, and opened the door. Ared had not looked back.

"Well, has he carried his precious bones down the hill without a tumble?" Mrs. Ryland asked, in what seemed a tone of spiteful derision.

"I wasn't watching, I don't know," said Josephine, pretending to be fumbling with the key in the lock to hide her flaming face.

"Oh, crow's eggs, crow's eggs!" scoffed the old woman, impatiently. "Don't believe you can blind me, child."

"Why should I, mother?" asked Josephine mildly.

Her mother had resumed her seat at the table, but she was no longer playing the part of a simpering old woman who lived in the past. She seemed quite rejuvenated in spirit, indeed, and her words came quickly, with a certain hardness in them, in sharp contrast with the slow, Southern drawl which she affected for visitors.

"Josephine," said she, eyeing her daughter sharply between squinted lids, "you'd better send that sheep-herding fellah off about his business in the mawnin'. You're gettin' yourself in love with him, and he's not the kind of a man I've planned for my do-tah to marry."

"Mother, you're mistaken—all around. Mistaken in me, and in Mr. Heiskell, too. I'm not getting in love with him——"

"No, you're already in, up to your silly ears!" her mother said.

"And he's good enough for any woman," finished Josephine, a little shake in her voice.

"There, you've as good as confessed!" sharply. "I'll not have him in the family, I tell you, Jo; I'll not have him!"

"Why, mother, he doesn't want to marry *you*, does he?" asked Josephine, with a little, jerky laugh.

"The idea, Jo!" said Mrs. Ryland.

"Then don't worry about the rest of the family," said the daughter, calmly.

"I didn't bring you up to marry a sheep-herder," persisted Mrs. Ryland.

"He isn't a sheep-herder, even if I wanted to marry him," Josephine denied.

"He has been," said her mother, "and there's insanity in the family, too. His father went crazy, years ago, Mr. Sandford told me to-day."

"Well, I don't believe it, mother," said Josephine, serenely. "What interest had Mr. Sandford in telling you all this alleged history in regard to Mr. Heiskell?"

"Child, he's inter-usted in you—in us. He don't want to see us lose the money your fatha put into this lease."

"The generous young thing!" mocked Josephine. "Well, if he said that he lied, mother."

"Jo, why don't you set up and look at things right?" asked her mother, pettishly. "I tell you, child, if I was as young and handsome as you are I'd mighty quick make friends with Mr. Sandford, and the first thing *he* knew, I'd up and marry him."

"Oh, mother, you wicked, mercenary creature!" laughed Josephine.

"When some folks are in love, or e-magine they're in love," said her mother, rebuking her levity with a serious look, "they can't see their own inter-usts. I nevah was that way. I reckon I was in love with forty diff'unt men befo' I married your pa. A young

lady's bound to be in love more or less till she settles down, and the wise one loves where her inter-usts are the brightest."

"Well, I'm not going to catch Mr. Sandford up with a rope and marry him," said Josephine, blowing the whole matter away on a sigh as she got up from the table. "I'm going to bed."

"I'll not have any sheep-herdin' fellah brought into this family to shame your fatha's name!" said the old lady with asperity.

"Mother, you may make your mind easy about Mr. Heiskell," said Jo. "I don't believe he has even the remotest interest in marrying, and least of all in marrying into this highly-pedigreed family."

"He looks at you like a sheep-dog," said Mrs. Ryland.

"I don't believe he could tell the colour of my eyes if his life depended on it," Jo declared.

"But he can see the value of this leasehold as shawp as a bankah," nodded her mother.

"He doesn't have to marry me to get his share in that," said Jo.

"No, you're giving him my estate for no value received that I can see," Mrs. Ryland charged, accusingly.

"You know what the conditions are—you agreed to them before Mr. Heiskell moved his machinery over here and went to work."

"Yes, I know I did, child. But in our eagerness to save ourselves I'm afraid we threw away something

we might have saved. If we'd gone to Mr. Fleming and made friends——"

"I wouldn't stoop to it," said Jo.

"But you'll give away thousands to a stranger——"

"He must earn what he wins," corrected Jo.

"You've put a beggah on a hoss," said Mrs. Ryland, shaking her head in doleful prophecy, "and you'll have a hawd time gettin' him out of the saddle, I'm afraid."

"If you're dissatisfied with my management of the estate, mother——"

"Say no more, not one word more, child," admonished her mother, lifting a silencing hand.

Josephine turned toward the kitchen door. Her mother shook her head in depreciative sadness.

"You wouldn't have to sleep in the kitchen long if you'd set up and listen to reason," said she.

"Are you gong to bed, mother?" asked Jo, allowing the remark to go unheeded.

"D'reckly, child, d'reckly," her mother answered, pettishly.

Jo passed out, closing the kitchen door behind her. Mrs. Ryland remained seated near the small, shaded lamp, her thin brows gathered in concentration.

When Ryland had retreated from the confusion of his quickly-made and quickly-lost fortune to this last stand, he had built a two-roomed house, with a lean-to kitchen, for the temporary shelter of his

family. If he had lived, he doubtless would have bettered the condition of both his house and his affairs, but his sudden going had left the one unfinished, and the other with but a slipping hold in his little family's hands.

Ryland, certain of life as all men of vigour are, had made no will. His affairs had passed into his daughter's hands, her mother disclaiming all business aptitude in widowhood, as she had long proved it as a wife. As Ryland had quit the world even with it, there were no debtors to clamour for settlement, and nobody interested, therefore, in the final disposition of his insecure estate.

No one, that is, but Horace Fleming, whose enmity pursued the unfortunate speculator to the grave.

Mrs. Ryland, whose youthful beauty had exacted concessions from the world, after the manner of beauty, no matter how high or how humble the sphere in which it moves, had demanded the continuance of this interest on loveliness long after time had cancelled the principal completely. When the world was no longer moved to stepping aside with alacrity by her withered hair and shrunken cheeks, she still collected her small tribute from her family.

The tenderloin of the steak was hers, claimed from the rights of her ancient prestige, and the breast of the fowl. The tenderest chop on the platter went to her plate, the choicest fruit, the hottest toast. She always claimed, by right of beauty's sov-

ereignty, the best room in the house, and the best furnishings for it. The world had spoiled her by its transitory homage, and now she lived, in her attenuated ugliness, according to the old scheme of selfishness, when to desire was to command.

In this little house she had the room into which the east and the south sun fell. The south window looked out upon the public highway, the east across the grassy meadows which lay as nature had adorned them. This window also gave her a view of the derrick and engine of Heiskell's outfit, and the two tents near by, in which the driller and his helper lived.

Mrs. Ryland heard her daughter close and lock the outer door of the kitchen; heard the springs of the young woman's cot complain under their lovely burden. She then lifted the lamp and carried it into her boudoir. There she lowered the shades and settled down into the one rocking chair beside her little stove, putting down with a sigh her effort to make the world believe her still beautiful.

It was as if she had relaxed from a cramped posture, or put off an uncomfortable shoe, for playing the part of beauty was as arduous as it was empty. With all her mincing and mowing, and rolling of her young eyes in her old face, she never deceived anybody except herself. And now, the pretence put aside, her age free to show as old as it was, and her ugliness as sharp as it might be, the change was not as shocking as Mrs. Ryland probably imagined. The

repose of her strained face and tired old mouth was even a relief.

Still, she kept the glass behind her, sitting there with her hands hooked back of her head in an unconscious pose of youth. That is one advantage that we homely ones of the earth have above the fair. We are not afraid of the glass when the upholstering of this human frame shrinks and slumps away. Time has no laugh at our expense.

Mrs. Ryland rocked, gently, her feet on a hassock, her skirts pulled back half way to her knees. Perhaps she had her dreams, maybe——

On the pane of her south window—the one looking upon the public road, there was a sound as of the soft drumming of fingers. She started, quickly, and flung her skirts down over the knobs of her ankles, and leaned over, gathering the garments tightly in her hand, as if to shut out a mouse. The cautious, soft drumming came again. Mrs. Ryland looked toward the window with surprised, yet not frightened bearing.

At the worst, it could be nothing more than a man, and Mrs. Ryland never had been afraid of men. She went cautiously to the window and lifted the shade a few inches. Immediately there was pressed against the pane an envelope. A man's arm ran from it, a man's hand held it. At the worst, nothing but a man.

Mrs. Ryland opened the window and put out her hand. The envelope was laid in it; she felt the cold

fingers of the messenger for a moment as he pressed it firmly into her palm. No word was said on either side of the window, and although the widow listened she did not hear the footsteps of the mysterious man.

She waited, the sash raised two or three inches, her breath balanced on her lips. Presently a motor car coughed down the road toward the west, quickly, as if it had been cranked. The subdued sound of the working engines followed, grew dim, died under the hill. Mrs. Ryland closed the window, and stood with the envelope in her hand.

It bore no name, no mark. She turned it, curiously, in the light to see. Her heart stirred strangely. Perhaps it was an affair. Hope lives a long time in the bosom which once has been the seat of beauty. Mrs. Ryland sat in her chair again, drew a hairpin from her scant locks and ripped the stout linen of the envelope.

A pleasurable light flashed over the old woman's face as she half drew the contents of the envelope forth, and then, quickly, with a catching of the breath such as comes of a happy surprise, hid the letter between her palms. Perhaps it was an affair; perhaps oil had not quite stifled romance there.

Mrs. Ryland looked around her room, craftily. A smile stole over her full, pouting lips. Her hand sought her bosom, where letter and contents were hidden quickly, among other secrets to which no man held a key.

CHAPTER IX

THE BIG GRUNT

THE offices of the big company were in a new brick building on a prominent corner in Oil City. Early as it was when Heiskell arrived on the appointed morning, Fleming was at his desk, and the young driller was obliged to wait until the general had worked through his first pressing orders of the day.

From the outer office where he waited, Heiskell could hear the big man's voice, now at the telephone, now talking directly to some employé who had been summoned through his private door. Fleming's tones were loud, and his orders were barbed with profanity. If there were any secrets about the conduct of his business, thought Heiskell, he must have a sound-proof vault built in the basement where he communicated them to his underlings.

A self-contained lad with a snub nose, which gave his face a cast of disgust, as if he had smelled the world when he first arrived in it and found it distasteful, and had been unable to right his expression since, sat at a desk near Fleming's door. There was a fresh, clean pad on the lad's desk, and a little box

of elastic bands. There was neither pen nor paper, nor anything which indicated that the youth ever recorded an order or engrossed a thought.

When, after more than an hour's wait, the blatant electric alarm on the boy's desk announced that Fleming was ready to receive his visitor, the warder got up, opened the door wide, and twitched his nose like a rabbit as he jerked his head in signal for Heiskell to pass.

From where he stood, Heiskell could see Fleming at his elaborate mahogany desk, a wrinkle across the back of his coat from shoulder to shoulder. Fleming was working with both hands piling letters into the arms of his stenographer, and the set of his coat seemed to indicate that very soon he must work himself out of it, like a bull-snake casting its slough.

There seemed to be something familiar in the set of the man; Heiskell wondered, as he entered the room, where he had seen him before. Fleming piled the last handful of letters upon the heap in his stenographer's arms, and turned to face his caller. Then Heiskell identified him as the man from whose unwelcome attentions Jane Sloane had fled on that most important of all his nights.

If Fleming recognised Heiskell, he displayed no indication of it. As he swung his chair about there was an expression on his face which he doubtless meant to answer for a smile, but the cast in his eyes seemed to proclaim that he despised himself for it. It was a rough-blocked, animal face, large-

featured and lined a little in the brown, tough skin. His moustache was trimmed to the line of his straight, great mouth. His eyes were cynical, small, and his forehead shallow, with heavy black hair brushed down upon it in barberish sweep.

"Glad to see you, Heiskell," said he, offering his hand. "How're y'u comin'?"

"Very well, thank you," replied Heiskell, resenting inwardly the man's patronising, managerial manner, and the sneer which lay in his eyes.

Fleming pushed the chair which his stenographer had occupied away from the corner of the desk with his foot, and nodded. Heiskell seated himself, his old hat on his knee.

"I hear you've got a purty good little outfit over there on the Ryland lease?" said Fleming, measuring Heiskell up and down with impertinent eyes.

"I get along very well with it," said Heiskell, drawing back into his shell of reserve.

"Well, it'll never pay you for the coal you'll burn puttin' down a hole on that land," Fleming declared, his face hardening. "That's an unprofitable undertaking for a young feller that ought to be goin' ahead. Well, say, Heiskell, I just wanted to give you a friendly steer, that's all."

He lifted his hand, imposing silence as Heiskell would have spoken, perhaps hastily, as the quick colouring of his face betrayed.

"I know all about you and the old man puttin'

down them holes up there on the hill and wastin' years of your time, and everything else you had, on 'em, and I want to put you right before you shoot off at an angle again. If you'll listen to me, you'll win out; but if you stick to the job you've tackled, you'll go broke and you'll hit the grit harder than you ever hit it in your life."

Heiskell swallowed his indignation and answered mildly, although he could not trust his eyes to look into Fleming's face.

"Your interest in me is generous, Mr. Fleming," he said, "but I guess I can manage——"

"That's where you've got another guess comin'!" Fleming took him up sharply. "You don't know any more about oil than a cat knows about Christmas. If you want to learn the business and make money, git under my wing—and I'm not offerin' men this chance every day, kid."

"In other words, you want me to stop drilling on the Ryland lease and let the option expire by default," said Heiskell, feeling quite cool and collected and beyond the danger of an unseemly explosion now.

"I'm offerin' you an opening, Heiskell, because I believe there's something to you, and I don't want to see you always buttin' your head up against a tree. You're an unlucky man, Heiskell, and you will be till you kiss a nigger, as the man said. Put your unprofitable pride and high-flyin' notions in your pocket and take my advice—it'll pay you a

good deal better in the end than rammin' around bull-headed and blind in your own style."

"I haven't heard your proposition yet," suggested Heiskell.

"Well, to begin with, I need a man about your size over there on that property where Sandford's in charge. I want to move him. Take your drill over there in the morning and go to work on a job that'll pay. No young man ever hitched up with me and lost money by it."

Heiskell rose in stiff dignity.

"I didn't come here to listen to a dishonourable proposal," said Heiskell, forgetting that he had, not a minute before, as much as asked Fleming to make it, in his desire to sound him and learn how far he would ask a man to go.

Fleming had not forgotten, and he caught Heiskell up on it with a sneer.

"You didn't, eh?" said he. "What'd you ask me to make it for, then? Ain't the bait big enough, or what's wrong?"

Heiskell felt as if he could melt out through a nail hole if there had been one presented.

"I didn't mean to draw that kind of a proposal from you, anyway," he confessed, laying bare his hope.

"No, you thought I was ready to buy you and that fool girl off. Well, I'm not. I'll never pay the Rylands a cent for that lease. Hell, I've got the cream from under that land already!"

Fleming turned back to his desk, as if to say the conference had come to an end. But he wheeled again suddenly.

"Suppose you got oil there," said he, his face congested, his eyes like an angry boar's, "who's goin' to buy it?"

"That's a bridge to be crossed when we get to it," Heiskell said.

"It's one you'll never git over, young feller. Well, you can either let go over there where you're at, and come in on the reservation and be good, or I'll put a knot in your tail that'll make you jump in seven different directions. I'm givin' it to you straight, so you'll know what to expect."

Heiskell's reason told him to go and leave it where it stood, but there was a word on his tongue that he felt must be spoken.

"Fleming, why can't you tote like a man with those women?" he asked. "That lease is a small matter to your company, and I can't understand where a man of your calibre can find either satisfaction or honour in carrying a quarrel against a man beyond the grave."

"That's none of your business!" said Fleming. He took a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and bit it savagely in the corner of his mouth, twisting his lips around it in every expression of a growl but the sound.

"That's all right, too," said Heiskell, hot in his turn, "but I'm going to serve notice on you now

that I'm on that job to stick. I've got forty-one days yet to bring in a producing well, and I'll bring it in. If your company won't buy the oil, maybe it can be handled some other way."

Fleming got up with a stretching, yawning movement. The flush of anger had left his face, and that sour distortion that he drew for a smile moved round his mouth again.

"I've offered you peace——"

"At the price of manhood," said Heiskell.

"But you prefer war," continued Fleming, unruffled. "All right. This is twice that you've walked off with the girl—or tried to. Son, when I used to pack a gun down in Texas I always let a man call me a liar once. The next time I got busy. So you're goin' in to save another kitten, are you? All right, go to it!"

There was no question about the finality of the conference. Fleming figuratively put out the lights. He sat down at his desk and presented his back. Heiskell saw the door standing open before him.

Triggerheel had steam up when Heiskell got back to the works, and the drill was set going. There would be time enough to report the result of his meeting with Fleming to Jo Ryland after shutting down. She would know from his eagerness to get to work that the fight was to go ahead

on the original lines. But she appeared in the yard presently, and he signalled with his hat for her to come down.

She came bareheaded as she was, the strong, icy wind in her hair. Mrs. Ryland, at her window, looked after her, and sat rocking across the little opening in her curtains as they talked.

"He tried to buy you off," was her first word as she came up to him, panting from her run down the hill.

"I think that Fleming is accustomed to doing business with dishonest men, largely," said he. "He seems to have a mighty poor opinion of his kind."

"It's an old story, except that it has a different ending," said she. "I knew what he wanted you for. That's why I didn't go."

"He wants to know who'll buy the oil when we get it," said he.

"But he didn't say he'd refuse to buy it from whoever we sell our lease to, did he?"

"No, but I believe he's bully enough to carry his feud out against an innocent purchaser."

She bent her head, and stood a little while in thoughtful silence.

"Are you discouraged, partner?" she asked, at last, looking up wistfully into his face.

"I hope I haven't given you ground for that impression," said he.

"I thought you seemed a little blue," she said.

"Not on my own account. It doesn't mean much

to me if I lose, and Fleming says I will lose, for I'm an unlucky man."

"He means your former explorations—several years ago?"

"That's what he means."

"And he offered to brighten things up for you if you'd go over to him?" she nodded, her understanding keen in the experiences of the past.

"He proposed that," admitted Heiskell, blushing over the recollection of his humiliation.

"He's a powerful friend," said she, seriously. "Maybe you'd do better by throwing up this gamble and going in with him."

"If you meant that, it would be unforgivable," said he, searching her face with a reproving look.

"I don't mean it, I don't!" she disclaimed, heartily, a flame of admiration, and perhaps something more, springing into her eager face. "You turned him down for my forlorn hope, and I knew you'd do it when you went."

"It isn't so very much to my credit, at that," said he. "That much is to be expected in the run of the day of any white man. I was in earnest about this work before I met Fleming, and I'm eager now. I'm going to turn your hope into a fruitful certainty."

"You're a man, partner!" she said, in simple sincerity.

"Thank you, Jo," said he.

She started at the familiar address, and lifted

her handsome head, a smile dawning on her lips. But it glimmered out like a sickly fire when she saw his eyes, fixed in that unconscious abstraction which seemed a habit of his, far away on things in which she felt it useless to hope ever to see with him, or enter into and share. She left him, and he seemed unconscious of her going.

Ared was completely insulated by the soft weavings of his dream. He had spun himself into insensibility of every feminine charm apart from her whose lips had set their seal upon his brow. Like a bold spider architect he sat beside his fire that night, throwing out long, bright lines to blow in the zephyrs of his fancy and find anchorage upon the shore of ultimate felicity.

The song of Jane Sloane was in his memory always, the image of her face was etched upon his heart. He did not question whether she was worthy, whether she was sham or sincere, or consider whether her parting act had been the quick, moving impulse of a volatile soul, and nothing more. He was not sophisticated in sufficient degree to go into phases of his adventure such as that. Whether she, worldly and wise far beyond his understanding, had centred upon him for the easy-natured, simple rustic that he was, and had given that parting salute in full for all obligations, in self-felicitation, mainly, for the easy outcome of her dilemma, he was not schooled in worldcraft far enough to raise the point.

Only this. He had exalted her in his heart, and he believed in her. She was his cloud by day and his pillar of fire by night, and he followed her without looking down for pitfalls, quagmire or treacherous sands. One day, when he had put bridle and saddle on the world, he had shaped his dream to seek her and uncover his heart.

Triggerheel came over to his tent after his late supper. He had been long on the road from Oil City with a jag of coal, and he was grimy about the nose and ringed around the eyes, like a raccoon, but his spirits were at the same even pitch where he maintained them against all discomforts and delays.

"That Harvard-Yale feller must be cuttin' a shine around the widder," he grinned, doubling his long legs under him and raking a coal out of the fire for his pipe.

"What makes you think so?" asked Ared, moved by the humour of the suggestion.

"He's up there at the house to-night, with an automobile as big as a furniture car," said Triggerheel.

"Maybe it isn't the widow he's after," suggested Ared.

Triggerheel squinted at him queerly.

"Mean to say you'd set there and see him spur around anybody else in that family?" he asked.

"If they'll stand for it why shouldn't I?" laughed Ared.

"Well, you're the funniest feller!" marvelled the old man.

"How's that?"

"Oh, n-n-nothing," said Triggerheel, marking in the ashes with a stick.

"Sandford may be a good enough sort of a boy in his way," Ared said.

"Maybe so—for them that likes it; but I ain't one of 'em," declared Triggerheel feelingly. "Well, I saw old Purty over in town."

"Drunk?"

"No; workin'. Got a job teamin' from the big company. Ain't a feller this side of a circus can handle six mules in a string better 'n that boy."

"I'm glad to hear he's good for something," said Ared. "Did he pay you back that six-bits he took the night he sneaked off?"

"Who—Purty?" asked the old man, in surprise.

"Yes, of course. Did he pay you?"

Triggerheel was silent a while, as if the question had a kick in it that took his breath away.

"No, Purty he never paid me," said he, at last, in a far-away, cold sort of tone.

It was plain that he neither expected nor required it of Purty, and that he felt the question to be ungenerous, and an invasion of his private rights.

"I hope he'll stick to the job," said Ared.

"Well, he'll not do it," sighed the old man. "He'll keep swillin' till he lands in the fool-house or the

grave. Say, I brought a Kansas City paper over with me. Would you care to see it?"

"Sure."

In those days the Western papers were spouting oil on every page, and the one that Triggerheel had picked up in town was no exception to the general rule. The come-easy money of the wild-cat promoters was spent in advertising with liberal hand, that one item being their only expense.

Every day saw some ephemeral or rascally scheme pass out of public review and a new one take its place, but the same gushers kept on spouting for them all. The cut of a spewing oil well said to be in Texas in an advertisement yesterday might serve to illustrate one just brought in along the Kansas border, or in Oklahoma, to-day.

The first thing that Heiskell saw when he unfolded the paper in the light of his lantern was one of these mounting, spouting, spreading advertisements. At the first glance the big headline held him, for there seemed to be something familiar, something that he had read in print before, in the staring words "The Prophet of Oil," which stretched across the page.

His heart seemed to tremble and hold still in the expectancy of disaster as his eyes scanned the blatant announcement of the Prophet's Well Oil Exploration Company, as it was termed. And there, below the fold of the sheet, stood his father's picture, between two spouting wells, and underneath it:

"Solomon Heiskell, the Prophet of Oil in the Big Pool District."

The picture was somewhat idealised, like a photograph retouched to cover the damage done by time to the original or to remedy some oversight in nature. Old Solomon's hair was longer in the picture than in life, and it had a romantic curl to it which its natural state did not display. His face was even more gaunt than his hard years had made it, and his eyes were uplifted like those of a prophet in a church window,

Ared searched the page for the answer. At the bottom he found it, where the names of the sponsors of the company stood in large type.

"Solomon Heiskell, President and General Manager," on one hand, and "W. Ivers Drumm, Fiscal Agent," on the other. "Make all checks, drafts, and money orders payable to W. Ivers Drumm," was the capitalised instructions beneath the fiscal agent's name.

That was the key to it. Solomon Heiskell was in the hands of a rogue. Ared saw in one swift picture the story of his father's adventures in pursuit of his dream. He had gone about Kansas City—where the new company's offices were—in search of capital, and had met this man Drumm. Drumm had been quick to seize the advertising possibilities of the picturesque old man and his doubly picturesque story. Solomon had shown that story of his explorations for oil from the *Oil City Star*, and the shrewd

promoter had snapped up the nickname which the local editor had given him.

Ared turned back to the beginning of the advertisement with a feeling of one disgraced. It was extravagantly worded, in that breathless, galloping style which the men of Drumm's school of finance found so convincing of sincerity. Breathlessly, like a messenger with a big story; hot, with sweat streaming down the face. That was Drumm's style.

The advertisement stated that the Prophet's Well Company owned outright a large tract of land in the heart of the Big Pool district, where it already had drilled to a depth of twenty-seven hundred feet in its determination to rest satisfied with nothing less than the fountainhead of oil itself. It said they were plunging deeper every hour. It was only a matter of days—perhaps hours—even while the advertisement was being read, in fact, it might have happened, until the drill must pierce the unmeasured reservoir which held this gigantic store of oil. The advertisement continued:

On our property a stream of almost pure oil issues from the hillside. Years ago, Solomon Heiskell set out to trace it to its source, but he lacked the means to push his explorations to success. Years ahead of anybody in the Big Pool district, Solomon Heiskell knew the oil was there. He told his neighbours, he begged for the assistance of capital in vain. Time has proved him right. Millions are being taken from wells every week on all sides of our property. At any moment now our big well, the most remarkable

oil well of its kind in the world, may open the heart of this deposit——

Two million shares in the company were offered for sale to the public to provide funds to push this work of exploration. The price was ten cents a share. "Ministers are investing their savings, widows are telegraphing their reservations," the advertisement declared. "Order to-day! Use the wire! A dollar invested to-day may return you a thousand next week!"

Plenty of exclamation points, lots of dollar marks, and a picture at the bottom of a pipe running from a well at one side of the page pouring minted money into a woman's apron at the other end. She was garbed in the sad habiliments of widowhood, and her bonnet was black, but she was smiling through the rain of fortune.

Ared's indignation was at flood tide when he finished reading the page. It was enough, thought he, that the loss and disappointment of that fatuous dream should lie on the shoulders of the two who had shared it in the past. To induce hundreds more to come forward with their small savings, in their longing for affluence, and invest in this dishonest scheme, was a thing which he would have believed to be far below his father's sanction.

For it was dishonest. There was no oil beneath those melancholy hills, said Ared, sick in his heart under the shadow of this dishonour.

With the paper trailing in his hand, he sought Triggerheel, who was preparing to go to bed.

"Did you see this?" he asked, indicating the advertisement.

"Yes, I kind of run my eye over it," said the old man, making out to be very busy with his boots.

"This advertisement says they're at work over there on the old place. Did you hear anything about whether they are or not?"

"No, they ain't," replied Triggerheel. "Purty he saw that in the paper some days ago, and he went up there to see if he could strike a job. Nobody wasn't around there at all."

"I hope—you—well, I'm not connected with the scheme in any manner. You know that, don't you?" said Ared, ashamed for the taint which he felt had reached him already.

"I knowed you wasn't," said Triggerheel, with hearty comfort.

"Were they saying anything about it over in town, or did you hear?"

"I didn't hear," replied Triggerheel, "but if I was you I wouldn't worry. The old man can take care of hisself, can't he?"

"It doesn't look like it," said Ared bitterly.

"Lots of money's been made off of them oil-well-stock sales that-a-way," commented Triggerheel, "and some of 'em I knowed of down there in Taixis didn't have nothing like as much back of 'em as this one of your old man's. He's got a hole in the

ground to show 'em if they git after him too tight, and that lets him out. Under the law they can't lay a hand on him as long as he can show development's been done, and a try after oil's been made."

"The worst of it is, he believes it's there," said Ared, "but I can't understand why he lends his name to such a plain swindle. He must know there's no work going on there—he *must* know it, unless he's lost his mind!"

"Maybe it is there," nodded Triggerheel. "If they go ahead and put down that well——"

"It's half way to hell already," said Ared, turning on him almost savagely, "and it'll never run a drop of oil if it's sunk clean down!"

He went back to his tent, where Triggerheel saw his light burning for a long time after. Next morning Ared sent the old man on a special journey to the post office at Oil City, bearing a letter addressed to Solomon Heiskell, in some big building or other, up in Kansas City.

CHAPTER X

IS HE A QUITTER?

BEGINNING earlier than before, continuing later than ever, Heiskell now prosecuted his fight against the strata of stone which interposed its stubborn barrier beneath his feet, and the racing hours which winged over his head. Stone and time. One ran away as fast as the other stood, offering its hidden breast to his slow-wearing drill.

Only twenty days of his precious allotment now remained. He was down more than four hundred feet, with from two to three hundred feet yet to drive before he could hope to reach the oil-bearing sand. Yet he had not permitted doubt nor despair to stand before him for a single hour after his meeting with Fleming. He was determined to prove to that hard-mouthed, coarse-souled man, as well as the little world which knew him and his story, that the Heiskells were not always unlucky men.

There was a red sunset that evening. It dipped the undulating landscape in hues of deceptive warmth, as cheery as an open fire, but the ground was hard frozen, and the wind bit with deep-piercing ache.

Heiskell had been cleaning out the bore with the sand pump, and the drill was silent for a spell. He stood by his little engine, his arms folded on his chest, looking over the sun-painted scene. The tintured light softened his lean, grimy face; the wind flattened the brim of his hat back against its crown, as if the silent forces of the evening had combined to show him in his statuesque unconsciousness for the model of determination.

He was thinking how the activities of this new business had changed the face of that landscape. It was quite different in the time when he, a stripling youth, stood as master in the district school.

Just beyond the swell of the land, past the line of derricks at the border of the lease, the schoolhouse stood. There were walnut trees around it in those times; he wondered if oil had spared them. Perhaps not. It had taken much away from what had been a place of quiet peace. It had taken the quaint old log houses that the Indians had built, in their half-civilised days before the land was opened for settlement, and it had taken the fields with the corn shocks in them, and the grazing cattle, and the orchard trees beside the road.

He wondered whether it had given anything to compensate, in the true measure of human comfort and happiness, in return. To the simple landholders it had given wealth which they had not been schooled to enjoy, and it had lifted them with dizzy suddenness out of a station which they had graced in

usefulness to a neutral atmosphere of strangeness and pretence.

Oil had come suddenly, like a tide which rises in the night, and out of the ant-holes which men pricked into the earth's skin with such gigantic labour, it had run in stifling waste over their furrowed fields. Grain would ripple over them in yellowing sheen no more; the cattle would not turn home again at evening in the paths of their grassy meads. But from the revenues of the stinking wells sons and daughters would go abroad, to breathe the culture of other lands, and come back with discontented hearts, maybe; out of the fatness of the black streams which welled, old men would hang adornments of gold and precious stones upon the necks of old women, sun-scorched, labour-galled, common as the soil from which they had lifted their rough hands but yesterday.

Now, he was there, striving for this, also, although his heart held no desire for it, or for the place or consequence which its winning might bring. Retirement, and repose; a fire on the hearth, and "a song at twilight." That was enough.

So, he stood there with his dream going out again to roam the world for her. It seemed to him then that it must always be an empty desire, a melancholy hope. He felt that he could have wept for her, as for one dead. In this manner these sombre reflections drifted over him, refining the memory of her to an almost spiritual degree.

A man must have a white light in his life; each of us is poet to that extent. A man must exalt something on his altar, to keep a corner of his heart clean through the subterfuges and deceptions of his daily life. Heiskell had exalted her. She filled his inner life—the life which one lives with his conscience—and the dream of her was sweet.

Triggerheel pulled into the radiance of the horizon, mounting the sharp line of the hill suddenly from the tip beyond. For a moment his wagon and team stood sharply on the background of sky—a mote of impertinence in the scheme of sublimity, it seemed—each spoke, free strap and dangling chain plainly drawn, and then the outfit turned the swell and became grey and hued of earth.

The old man was bringing coal, for the winter weather had increased the daily ration of the boiler greatly. Heiskell came back from his dream-rambling at sight of him, and went over to his tent, a hundred yards or so distant from the well, out of fire range in case of a sudden strike of gas, to set his coffee on to boil.

Triggerheel was scraping the last of the coal out of the wagon when Heiskell went over to the boiler to replenish the fire. The old man got down and came stamping to warm his numbed hands at the firebox.

"I met Pardner as I come over," said he.

That was the manner in which they spoke of Josephine between them. She was "Pardner" to

one as much as the other, for the old man had entered into the undertaking with all of the fire of his dry old body. He had seen the state of Heiskell's finances early in the fight, and straightway proposed that his wages go into fuel from that day forward. If they won, very well, then they could pay him; if they lost, he was a game man, and would lose with them. Ared was too hard-pressed to refuse the offer, so they became "pardners" all round.

"I didn't know she was going in to-day," said Ared.

"Yes, her and her mother. They was skally-hootin' along in Harvard-Yale's automobile. He was settin' at the works up in front, done up in a hairy coat like a bear."

"Pretty sharp weather for that kind of a ride," said Heiskell.

"Pardner don't care about it, I'll bet a leg," Triggerheel declared. "She goes along to keep that wall-eyed old woman out of devilment."

Heiskell looked at the old man with one of his hard-fetched grins.

"Afraid she'll rush the boy off and marry him?" he suggested.

"Well, Harvard-Yale he'd even tie up to the old woman to git his fingers on this lease, I reckon."

"Yes, men have gone to greater lengths than that for money," Heiskell agreed. "But marrying the old lady wouldn't give him the key."

"No, he'd have to marry Pardner," nodded the old man.

"And that's something unlikely," said Ared.

"She ain't got no more use for him than a cow's got for cigarettes," the old man said, with conviction.

They stood silent a little while, the old man spreading his hands to warm. His horses were humping their backs against the wind, with trembling flanks, cold now from their toilsome trip with the coal. Their dumb attitude of discomfort did not strike a pitying spot of softness in their owner's heart, easily moved that he was to human suffering and woe. Triggerheel was a range man, hardened in that school of unfeeling economics of the old-time herdsmen, who found it cheaper to let part of their cattle perish from the storms of winter than to build shelters for them all.

"Is there any smoke going up over on my old home place?" asked Ared, drawing his own shoulders up in sympathetic shudder as he turned from contemplating the misery of the horses.

"Not a smither," replied Triggerheel. "But that there advertisement's in the papers just the same as ever, and it *says* they're drillin' nearer and nearer to that oil every hour. Dang my melt if I can see how them wild-catters can keep on takin' money from folks——"

Triggerheel caught himself, suddenly conscious that he was doing his thinking aloud.

"Oh, well," said he, with a wave of his mittened hand, "I reckon they aim to begin drillin' before long."

"No, I'm afraid the man who calls himself the fiscal agent of the company has no such intention," said Ared. "My father believes he'll do what he says—if he didn't believe it there'd be a sudden reckoning in that office—but they've pulled the wool over his eyes."

"You don't think that feller aims to pocket the money?" asked Triggerheel.

"I don't know what his intention is," confessed Ared, "but I'm certain it's crooked, somewhere. If I could spare the time I'd go up to Kansas City and take a look clean down to the bottom of that business."

"The old man he didn't answer your letter?"

"Not yet."

"Maybe that fiscalin' feller got it," suggested Triggerheel.

"No telling."

"There's Pardner comin' back," said Triggerheel, looking toward the house, lined against the sky. The flamboyant colours were gone out of the west now. It was grey in the wake of the day round the little house on the hillcrest, and dusk in the little valley where the two men stood.

The women came trailing along from the road, leaning against the wind, the foremost one running as if eager for the shelter of her walls.

"Look at that old woman wavin' at him!" said Triggerheel, disgustedly. "She hangs back there like she had to steal a little private signallin' with that feller. A feller'd think Pardner was her ma."

"The spirit of youth lives longer in a woman's heart than it shows in her face, I guess," said Ared, by way of explanation of the old lady's frivolous conduct.

"Yes, no woman ever thinks she's too old to set some feller a hankerin' after her," Triggerheel allowed. "I had a mother-in-law one time that was that way."

The old man spoke of his one-time relative in the most casual manner, as if she was just an incident in a busy past. Ared turned to him in quick surprise.

"Why, I never knew you were married," said he.

"Well, I ain't—not right now," said Triggerheel.

"But you have been?"

"Four times," said the old man, sighing. "Three was Mexicans, and one was a Christian. She was a woman, from the ground up, too."

"Dead?"

"Choked on a piece of dried beef," said the old man, sorrowfully.

"Well, what became of the other three?" asked Ared, in amazement over the old fellow's revelations.

"I had to shoot a feller over one of 'em," Triggerheel explained, "and the other two run off."

"Oh, I see," said Heiskell.

"Yes," said Triggerheel, reflectively. "The feller he was a general in the Mexican army. Well say, I clean forgot them horses! I'll have to drive around and feed."

There was a light in Mrs. Ryland's room, and her shadow was on the window-blind as she crossed it now and then. Ared was considering whether he should start up the drill again, or shut down for the day, inclining to the latter course, for he was stiff and numb from the in-setting cold, but he put action on the thought aside for a little, while he stood looking up at the light behind the curtain, wondering what mission could have taken the two women out with Sandford on a bitter day like that.

As he turned it in his mind, Jo came swiftly out of the shadow of bush and bank. She had thrown a cloak over her head, and the wild wind was pulling rudely at her skirts. A loose strand of hair was blowing across her face as she came into the light of Ared's lantern. He thought it was like a wind-driven volley of his bronze oak leaves, harried across the snow.

"Jo, you'll be chilled to the heart," said he chidingly. "You shouldn't run out like that."

"Only for a little minute," she said, her redundant young breast heaving as she drew her quick breath. "I just wanted to tell you that mother and I accepted Mr. Sandford's offer to take us over to town in the light of a convenience, rather than a friendly overture."

"You don't owe me any explanation at all, Jo," he told her, a soft note in his slow and solemn tone, as always when he spoke to her.

"I didn't want you to think that we were courting the enemy," said she.

"I thought perhaps the enemy was courting you," he smiled.

"Well, he is, in his peculiar way," she admitted, with an easy frankness which no young woman can command when her own heart is involved. "Mother had to go over to court," she hurried on, as if to cover what she had said, "to settle up about some insurance that father left. We had to make some affidavits and things."

"So he's courting you, is he?" asked Ared, feeling a bridling of resentment against Sandford, a shadowy pang of jealousy, maybe, for this attempt at alienation.

She huddled a little closer to the roaring firebox, and he adjusted the blowing cloak around her.

"He wants to marry me," said she, looking earnestly into his face.

Ared was looking away over her head, in that wilful abstraction which at times made him appear boorish and crude.

"Well!" said he.

He appeared unmoved, uninterested. His exclamation seemed only the conventional expression such as one vents for want of something that springs from the heart.

"I don't believe you'd care—I don't believe you'd care at all!" said she, in wild suddenness which made him start.

She sprang away from him at that, and ran, her garments flying a moment in the circle of the lantern's light.

"Jo!" he called after her, moved sharply out of his pensive flight.

The sound of her flying feet came back to him. He followed after her a little way, and called her name again, in inflection of penitence and appeal. Once he heard her stop, as if considering return. In a moment she ran on, her swift feet sounding over the frozen earth.

Heiskell went back to the engine and shut off the steam. So that pup wanted to marry her, or rather, marry the lease? Well, it was to be expected that somebody should want to marry Jo, some day. It was no affair of his, but he'd like to see her go to a man with some weight of dignity to him, at least.

So, Sandford wanted to marry the lease, heh? Fine business, great and excellent planning! To step out of school one day and marry a fortune the next would be an instance of modern enterprise, fitting, indeed, to the family whence he sprung. But why should he care who married Jo, or when? It was all one to him, of course. Hadn't he his dream?

After the stubborn loyalty of his blood, nothing should be allowed to come between him and his dream. Nothing, in fact, could come between, for

the dream was annealed to his soul. To rive it from him would be to splinter the timbers of his life. He liked Jo; he admired her free, young figure, the lift of her pretty head, the speaking sympathy of her true and gentle eyes. But he did not love her. Another had pressed her seal upon his forehead; it glowed there like a warm hand, and set him apart as favoured among men.

He wondered why Jo had spoken in that way, charging that he would not care if she married Sandford? Why shouldn't he care—of course he'd care. He must see her after supper and assure her. He must seek Jo and satisfy her of his interest in her future. The thing must not go on like that.

It was quite dark now, and growing late. When he had finished his supper he looked up the hill, thinking of going to Jo. But there was no gleam of light in the little house. Well, it could wait till to-morrow—it was no great matter at the heaviest. Only, it moved him with a new feeling of tenderness for Pardner, to know that she was grieved to think he did not care whether she married worthily or unworthily. Of course he cared. Poor little Jo!

After his usual custom of splicing the day at both ends, Ared was up two hours before dawn next morning. He opened the drafts under the banked fire of his boiler, shook down the ashes and threw in coal, leaving it roaring as he went back to his tent to patch up a comfortless breakfast in the cold.

He had laid his hand on the canvas when he felt the ground shiver under his feet, and the air rushing upon him with suddenly gathered force plunged him headlong into the tent among his boxes and tins. The roar of an explosion rose with this appalling confusion, and his first thought was, as the hard-driven air lifted him like a straw, that the boiler had burst. His lantern was blown out by the concussion, and the suddenness of it left him dazed. The tent wall had collapsed; the canvas lay over him where he fell. He groped like a man under water, the breath slammed out of him, gasping to fill his emptied lungs.

When he came clear of the wreckage of the tent, he heard Triggerheel shouting, asking him something. There was a hissing as of escaping steam, or of water on live coals, confirming his first thought that the boiler had blown up.

He answered Triggerheel's hail. Each asked the other what had happened, and if he was hurt.

"No, I ain't hurt," said Triggerheel running forward through the gloom, "but a great big chunk of creation or somethin' went through my tent!"

Ared was looking where he had left the boiler. The shape of it was altered, and the fire from its furnace was scattered abroad. A chunk of glowing coal lay near his foot, and here and there others shone in the dark.

Triggerheel came up, panting.
"he blow up?" he asked.

"I thought so at first," replied Ared, "but come to think of it, I don't see how she could."

"Well, somethin' busted!" said the old man.

"Yes, but it couldn't have been the boiler, for there was only four pounds' pressure in it when I fired up not five minutes ago."

They were hastening forward toward the slanting heap of wreckage which remained of the boiler. Triggerheel suddenly laid his hand on Ared's arm, checking him, sniffing the air like a hound.

"Danamite!" said he. "Don't you smell it? Danamite, sure as hell!"

"You're right," agreed Ared, for the sharp, unmistakable odour of the explosive still hung over the wreck.

"Better not go steppin' around here in the dark too careless," Triggerheel warned, "maybe they's some that didn't go off. Wait! I'll git m' lantern."

Soon he came bobbing back with it, and at the same time another light flashed around the corner of the Ryland house.

"Pardner's coming," Ared said.

The destruction of the boiler was complete. It was torn and twisted and flung down from its wheels.

"Danamite!" said Triggerheel, with conviction. "Go slow!"

Josephine came running up, her cloak over her nightdress, which showed in a white fringe all

around. Her head was bare, and her stockingless feet were shod in fragile slippers.

"Is Ared hurt—is—is—anybody—hurt?" she asked, agony in her voice.

"There's nobody hurt," Ared answered, hastening forward to meet her.

"Oh, what was it—what's that? Did they—?"

"There was an explosion, of what we're not certain yet," he told her. "The boiler is a wreck, and out of business for good, it looks like now. I must hurry you back to the house now, out of this wind, and with daylight we'll look around."

Triggerheel was searching and peering under his lifted lantern. He was at the coal pile as Ared took the lantern from Jo's cold hand.

"I'll carry you—you'll freeze your feet," said he.

"Nonsense!" said she, bending her knees to bring the hem of her cloak to cover her white ankles.

"Here it is," announced Triggerheel, picking something from the coal. "They salted the coal, left enough here to blow the side out of the whole dang State!"

Forgetful of her scant garments, they hurried to the old man. He had clawed out five half sticks of dynamite, each of them wrapped in black paper so cunningly that they might easily have been overlooked even by day. Each piece was primed with cap and stubby end of fuse.

"Right in front of the fire-box door, where you couldn't miss it," said the old man indignantly.

"What a cowardly outrage!" said Jo.

"One for Fleming," said Ared in low voice, as if checking it off to himself.

"You might have been—killed!" The last fearful word she spoke in a whisper.

"Never mind," said he assuringly and with a quickness in his words which told her that he was not insensible to her tender interest. "We should have watched—Triggerheel suggested as much several days ago."

"Turn about half the night through," nodded the old man gravely.

"Well, it's done now," said Ared almost lightly. "After daylight—Come!" said he, taking her by the hand as if the disparity of years and experience between them was that of child and man.

He led her in that manner of protecting tenderness to the door. She did not ask him what he meant to do now, whether he believed he could repair the damage, or whether that blow meant the death of their one hope. She did not ask him any of the hundred things which thronged her excited brain, but walked beside him silently, clinging to his broad, rough hand.

"We'll talk it over after breakfast," he told her as if in answer to her thoughts, and turned to join Triggerheel as she closed the door.

Triggerheel was standing beside the coal heap, the little pile of explosives not a foot from his toes. He was holding the lantern in front of him, light-

ing three footprints in the dust which had settled when he shovelled the coal from the wagon the evening before. They were on the farther side of the pile, and undisturbed by the explosion.

"Look at them tracks!" said he.

"I see them," said Ared, bending over. "They're—don't they look small to you for a man's?"

"They do," said Triggerheel meaningly; "mighty small!"

"More like a boy's," said Ared.

"Well, when it comes light I'm goin' to see where they come from and where they went," the old man said. "Come over and have a cup of coffee with me this mornin'; your commissary looks to be out of fix."

Triggerheel was back at the coal pile with the first full light of morning, nosing on the scent of the tracks.

"Well, if there's a man this side of Georgy with feet that little he shorely orto be took up and put in a cage," said he. "I never knowed but one feller with feet within a size of them. Looks like she tromped in that coal dust a-purpose."

"Why, you don't think it was a woman, do you, Triggerheel?" asked Ared in amazement.

"I ain't a sayin'—not yit," Triggerheel replied seriously.

Ared left the mystery of the tracks to the old man, while he took inventory of the loss. As for the boiler, it was done for. The fire-box was blown

to pieces, the fragments were sown over several acres, and the flues were bent and twisted. The engine, due to its distance from the boiler, stood undamaged at the mouth of the well. But of what use was the engine without steam for it? That was Ared's thought as he walked about, turning the pieces of wreckage with his foot.

He had not been able to gather himself up yet after the shock. It was a grievous blow in a tender spot; it amounted almost to defeat, it seemed, looking at it in the blue-john light of that cold, harsh morning. First in his feelings was a vengeful resentment against the authors and instigators of the deed. It was in his mind, hot and strong, to ride in and accuse Fleming of the thing that hour.

Triggerheel came back after a little from his tracking.

"I follered 'em till the coal dust wore off," said he, "and then that hard-froze ground didn't take any more mark than air. She was holdin' straight for the road, but I'll bet you a purty she never went there."

Triggerheel looked meaningly and squarely into his partner-employer's face, and gave his head a little twist to emphasise his seriousness.

"Why, what do you think?" asked Heiskell, mystified.

"What's Harvard-Yale so thick with that old woman for?" hinted Triggerheel.

"Oh, that's carrying it too far!" said Heiskell.

"She don't like you, and she ain't got no use for me," said Triggerheel.

"But she wouldn't blow her own chances of saving this lease up in the air, even if that was so," Heiskell reminded him.

"Maybe Fleming promised to buy her out if she'd git shut of you. She'd do anything to hand you one."

"You don't know that," said Heiskell severely.

"I've got eyes in my head," the old man hinted.

"And something else, too," said Heiskell, with a shadowy smile. "No, that was a man's job, Triggerheel; we'll dismiss all other suspicions, if it's all the same to you."

Ared said it with a straight look into the old man's eyes. Triggerheel nodded, a little displeased at the rebuke.

"All right, Ed; whatever you say goes," said he. "Well, what's next on the programme? as the man said when he broke his leg."

"I want to think it over a little while," said Ared, confessing his unsettled state.

"We'll have to think quick and do quicker," said Triggerheel.

"Or put down the cards," Ared agreed, turning away from him to survey the ruin again.

Jo was coming, dressed now to weather any kind of blasts, with laced boots half way to her knees.

"Guess I'll make a fire and touch up that drill," suggested Triggerheel, finding therein an excuse for

leaving them together, as he usually managed to do when Jo appeared. "Lucky job you h'isted her up out of the well last night, Ed."

"It sure was," admitted Ared.

"Reckon we'll need it in a couple of days or so," speculated Triggerheel, feeling tentatively out as if to sound the intention which lay in the young man's mind.

"Maybe," said Ared, thinking a thousand miles away, it seemed.

Triggerheel looked at him with a frown. It seemed to him as if Ared had fared mentally in the explosion along with the boiler. His wits appeared to be scattered all over the township, and the grit blown out of him as clean as the sand pump scoured the detritus of the drilling out of the well.

The old man felt a drooping in the heart. He had expected a great deal more of Ed; he had looked for a man with a lean, long face like that to stand up and let the world hammer him like he was made of brass. Now he seemed weak in the knees and off the head entirely over this simple—for to Triggerheel what was not irremediable was far from discouraging—blow-up of a boiler.

"Hell!" said he, with a forceful expulsion of breath which carried his chew out along with it. He turned away, neither knowing nor caring whether Ared had heard him. Jo came up, paler than usual, with the same question in her eyes that Ared had read in the old man's only a moment past.

She managed a smile, but it had no warmth in it, and no cheer. It was as palely imitative of her old manner as the sickly sun of that morning was of the suns of summer days.

"Well, Ared?" said she, far more in that little questioning greeting than her words.

"I don't know just what to make of it, Jo," he answered, shaking his head like an old man.

He withdrew into himself with that, and fixed his eyes in his vexing—to Jo that moment—stare of abstraction, miles on miles and leagues on leagues beyond her.

"It seems—" said he, and left the words swinging, as if the chain of thought had broken.

"What?" she asked, irritably sharp.

She felt that she would like to lay hold of his shoulders and shake him out of that daze of wandering dreams, doubly vexed because she knew that she did not walk in the picture that he was making, wherever it might be.

"I don't know," said he, sighing. "It was a pretty hard jolt, just when we needed the machinery most."

"Yes, Ared, it was," said she softly.

He seemed to realise only then that she had drawn nearer to him in friendly relation. She never had addressed him thus familiarly by his name, never had spoken it in his hearing before that morning, when she called out, asking whether he was hurt. There was a sensation of fitness in this new footing of friendship and trust which was pleasing

to him, like a new garment. He drew his eyes away from their far searching, and smiled.

"The question is—what next?" said he.

"That's it."

"And I don't readily know how to answer it," he confessed. "I've got to think—to consider."

She thrust her hand suddenly into her pocket, and drew out a letter.

"What will you do to me? I forgot all about it till this minute!" said she. "I brought it over from the postoffice yesterday, and intended to give it to you last night when I came down, but——"

"Never mind," said he, taking the letter from her hand.

The superscription was his father's precise Spencerian, and the envelope was clamorously decorated with the name of the Prophet's Well Oil Exploration Company. Ared's hands trembled like a lover's as he opened it, but his inscrutable face was immobile as stone.

Josephine waited by for him to finish, almost trembling in anticipation of his next word. Would it be surrender, as his hedging and evading the direct question seemed to forecast? Had she made a mistake in him, had she exalted a man of straw? Why did he balance on facing the consequences of the treacherous blow, and waver on the verge of a declaration either of continued fight or tame surrender? Was this big, rugged, bony man a quitter? It shot a pang through her heart to admit even the

question, but it had to come, and it had to be answered.

More than an interest in the lease she had given him, freely and voluntarily, warmed with secret gladness that she had it to bestow. The love of her maiden heart had diffused its incense at his feet, but he had not seen it, had not felt. It was like water poured out upon the sand. No matter how pitifully tender the attempt to nourish a bloom, the discovery of the labour's futility could not bring back the wasted drops. It was gone out of the house of her heart, that strong and tender love, and even the late wakening to see his disenchanted face could send back only bitterness to fill its room.

He had begun with her, on that slipping hope, bravely, and with the words of a man on his lips. What if he should turn out a quitter in the hour when she needed the strength of a man as she might never require it again! But even so, she loved him, and in the turmoil of her doubt she found herself floundering to find him an excuse to palliate the worst, and a justification which would bear his weight, and lift him to his high place again in her fond breast.

CHAPTER XI

A SCENT OF OIL

A RED HEISKELL did not lift his glance from the written page to surprise the look of soft appeal which lurked in her honest eyes. It must come, that revelation of the inner man, she knew, when he had finished that bit of writing.

MY SON: I have delayed setting my hand to reply to your letter of three weeks ago, for I did not wish to sow the hot words of passion and reap the tares of regret. I can speak with a cool heart to you now, and consider without heat all that you advised.

As usual, your timidity obscures your reasoning. You are in a panic over something which you consider a substance, but if you had the courage to run your arm through it, you would find it to be but a cloud. I am not in the hands of sharpers and schemers, as you imagine, being quite old enough, experienced enough, and *courageous* enough to take care of myself. I am putting to a late use the facilities which Providence favoured me with, and in a short time I shall place the fortunes of this family on the footing that you have shrunk from attaining ever since your major years.

I am associated with an honest man, a bold man, a *business* man. He has had long practice in taking the world's

rapids, and he will stand at the helm, while I occupy the deck, and together we will send the bark of my fortunes through to the open sea. There is no shadow of question about this enterprise. The oil is there, on my land, as I have believed and known for many years. My reproach has been that my son had not the courage to seek and find it. But I have the means at last of reaching it, and enriching thereby not alone myself, but many who have joined me in the enterprise.

Mr. Drumm, my associate, was down to my property with a carload of machinery about one month ago, and a force of special men to prosecute the work of exploration. We are sinking the old well deeper. Mr. Drumm reports to me that you have left the place, and that he could learn no word of you from the neighbours or in the town. If my sanguinary—and I now believe partly insane—act of judgment against the flock which you so tenderly cherished, and held above the call of your duty and the ties of kinship and of blood—if that act, I say, resulted at last in driving you into a more manly pursuit, I shall feel justified. The loss which you bore through my act I shall adjust with you at an early day.

As for future advice, my son, first earn the right to give it before it is offered. Go your ways, and prosper meekly and mildly as you may. You always had a timid heart, and it is best, perhaps, that you seclude yourself and leave the world's big deeds to men. If there should come a time when you feel that you need an arm to lean upon, this one of mine, though old, is virile.

"Beyond the Alps lies Italy." You will remember that. I am climbing to my Italy in my old age. Do not attempt again, at the hazard of estranging me completely, to stop the machinery of this grand enterprise of mine. This is a

man's work; it is too ponderous for the arm of a weak-spirited boy. Interference might, in future, result in mangle. Leave the world's big things to *men*. Your father,

SOLOMON HEISKELL.

So ended Solomon Heiskell's letter to his son. Pedantic in its phrasing, after the old man's pedagogic style, but exultant and arrogant in a way altogether foreign. What Solomon believed to be his easy and triumphant success had drained him of forbearance, and dulled the fine feeling which was the groundwork of his being.

Ared lifted his face from reading it with his eyes narrowed, his nostrils distended, as if gathering himself for a dash through fire. He seemed unaware of Josephine's presence, so wholly engrossed by the sudden inspiration, or new determination, which the perusal of the letter appeared to instil. He beckoned to Triggerheel, who was kindling a fire at his forge.

"Come over and hitch up," he called.

Josephine felt her heart jump. Regret for what it had given him would not come back to it that day. Ared had come out of his mist of perplexity and doubt; he measured, before he had spoken a word to her in explanation of his abrupt activity, a bigger man than before.

Triggerheel, feeling the change of the wind in that order, dropped the bellows handle and hurried to his improvised stable, a grin on his dry old face.

Ared turned to Jo, his hand in the bosom of his coat with the letter.

"I'll have the drill going by this hour to-morrow," said he. "There's an old boiler over at my father's place that I'm part owner of, and I'll just borrow his share and get his consent afterward. The flues are good; it would make steam enough for three drills if we had the rigs."

Jo's face was bright with the sunrise of her renascent hope. She drew close to him, and laid her hand impulsively on his arm, her heart in her eyes.

"You've been a man, partner, at every step of the fight!" said she.

Before midday Ared drove with Triggerheel up to the bars in the fence at the old place. Everything stood as he had left it. No sign of the activities which the advertisement of the Prophet's Well Company proclaimed were apparent, and if Drumm, the fiscal agent, had come there with a car-load of machinery and men to run it, as his father had written, he must have gone with it to the very bottom of the old deep bore.

"And pulled the hole in after him," said Triggerheel.

The boiler stood among the bushes, as Ared had seen it last, and the line of rusty pipe leading off to the broken engine beside the "most remarkable oil well of its kind in the world," lay there undisturbed. Even the drill swung there as before, on

its thick rope, and the cover which old Solomon had placed over the projecting casing of the well still kept its place. Nobody had been meddling, for evil or for good. People who knew about the old explorations shunned the place for its unlucky blight; those who were strangers to it had no curiosity to satisfy. So it slept on in peace.

They cleared away the impeding saplings and greased the gear of the boiler. The tongue had rotted out of it, and Triggerheel trimmed and shaped a lusty young tree to take its place. They were on the road again within three hours, and before midnight the old boiler had been tested out, and coupled up with the steam-line carrying to the engine.

Triggerheel was weary, but well pleased. He wanted to stand guard over the plant until morning, but Ared sent him to his bunk.

"This is my night," said he.

"Ed, I thought for a minute this mornin' you was goin' to lay down on the job," said Triggerheel, making the confession manfully. "I take off my katy, and I apologise to you."

Ared swung a lantern from the timbers of the derrick, to guard against a dynamiter stealing up to it and striking them in that vital point, and then he set about building a shed over the boiler. He had it up by daybreak, and his bunk moved into it, along with his coffee-pot and frying pan. If they blew it up they'd take him with it, he was deter-

mined, for he intended to live on that spot, day and night, until the job was done.

The work progressed rapidly following the installation of the old boiler. For more than a week Mrs. Ryland had been confined to her room with influenza, and her imperative demands upon Josephine had kept the "purty part of the firm," as Triggerheel often referred to her, cooped within doors.

Every night Ared carried a report of the day's progress to Pardner, and they talked over their chances of success in the little parlour-dining-room, with the old lady's door ajar so that her faintest call might be heard.

Those were days of excitement and strain for both of them, for the well was down to "suspicious looking" rock, Triggerheel said. He had been present at the birth of many a well, some of them big gushers, and he was sharp to detect the indications.

"We're apt to bust through any day now," he declared one evening, as he tested the eroded formation which clung to the bit of the hoisted drill when the day's work was done.

Ared hurried up the hill with that information, flushed and palpitating, for he was quickened now not alone by his determination to win the lease for Pardner, but with the same eagerness that tintured his old, insatiable days when he searched for the fount of the oil-laden stream.

"We'll make it," said he, "we're good for a hundred feet in the eight days remaining to us, and

Triggerheel don't think we'll have to go that far."

Ared was standing just inside the door as he eased himself of this big news, and he was oily, and coal-grimed, and spattered with the reamings from the well. His hair was about his ears, and his lean face was as earnest as a prophet's.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear it—more for your sake now than mine," said she, offering her hand impulsively. "You—you—have worked so hard!" she stammered, confused as if something which she had thought secure in her breast had leaped up and revealed itself.

Mrs. Ryland's door opened, and the old lady's long neck craned around the corner. Her big eyes were wide and bright, and full of life for a sick person, Ared thought, and there was a flush on her drawn cheeks.

"Did you say you'd fetched in a well, Mr. Heiskell?" she asked.

"Not yet, but we're mighty close to it," he replied.

Josephine started at her mother's words, and drew away the hand which Ared held, hastily.

"You'd better lie down, mother," said she, blushing in further betrayal of what nobody had charged at all.

"No," said the old woman, resolutely, emerging from her retirement, "I want to hear about the well; I reckon I've got a right to share the news, child, such as it is."

She came into the room, a shawl about her, fresh-

made ringlets in her sapless old hair. She wore a great-flowered dressing gown, and there were rings on her foolish old fingers.

"I don't believe you're any nearer the oil than you were at the beginnin'," said she, pettishly. "You've been drillin' and drillin' down theh a monst'us time, it seems like to me, Mr. Heiskell, and you've found nothing mo' than wotah. That's as much as you'll evah strike!"

"Mother, Mr. Heiskell has invested a great deal of time, labour and money in this enterprise, and it's ungenerous of you to say that," reproved Josephine, but with gentleness. It seemed as if she felt that a harsh word would break the frail creature as a stone would crush a vase.

"It's triflin' business, in my opinion," said Mrs. Ryland, "and you've got only a little while mo', a precious little while mo'."

"I'm just going to ask you to withhold your judgment, madam," said Ared, lifting his calm eyes to her face.

"I don't believe your machinery's strong enough, you ain't got men enough," said she.

"I could have used one man more to advantage," Ared admitted, "but beyond that a thousand would have been useless so far as pushing the work any faster went."

"Mother is irritable, and perhaps a little feverish," said Josephine, placing her arm around the old woman and drawing her away toward her room.

"You must not consider anything that she has said, Mr. Heiskell."

"Certainly not," said he, perhaps a little more heartily than mere deference required.

Mrs. Ryland shook herself free from her daughter's arm with a petulant word. She turned again to Ared, who had laid his hand on the door to leave.

"Sheep-herdin' was your walk in life, I am told—mercy my soul! What was that?"

It was a shot, followed by others, quick and sharp, from the direction of the well. Ared flung the door open, to be met by that lifting, pushing sensation which the rushing of compressed air from an explosion gives the human senses. Then there came the sharp detonation of dynamite fired above ground.

Ared was leaping down the path. He was unarmed, and the night was thick, but his strongest desire in life that moment was that he might overtake and lay hands on the author of this new outrage. It was a fruitless wish. When he reached the well he found one of the timbers of the fifty-foot derrick blown off at the base and hanging free, and the whole rig so badly shaken and strained as to threaten collapse.

Triggerheel was not there, and did not answer to the shout that Ared raised. Ared hurried to the boiler house after a lantern, and began making a survey of the loss. The engine was undamaged,

likewise the well. The string of drilling tools lay on the ground, due to the sag of the structure, but appeared to be untwisted.

From the quick survey that Ared gave the wreck, he estimated that it would require two days to set things in working order again. The timber which the charge of dynamite had torn in two might be spliced, he hoped, and the rest of the rig braced. But it would be impossible to do anything until morning, precious as the intervening hours were.

Triggerheel came back from the direction of the road, panting from his run, one of his old black pistols in his hand.

"Got away," said he.

"Did you see him?" asked Ared. Then, before Triggerheel could reply: "How did they come to put it over this time, with two lanterns hanging on the derrick and you on the look-out?"

"My fault, dang my melt!" said Triggerheel contritely. "I'd been over givin' m' team some hay to chaw on for the night, and I was standin' there kind of stretchin' m' neck around like a feller will, you know, when he ain't thinkin' of nothin' in pertickler. I noticed both of them lights burnin' at the well, and I looked up the hill, wonderin' if you'd come back. Just then I seen' the blind go up in the old woman's end of the house, and she set the lamp on somethin' near the winder. That was all right, I reckon. She had a right to do that, I suppose."

The old man paused ruminatively.

"Of course," said Ared. "What's that long rigmarole got to do with that devil sneaking up on the blind side of you and setting off his dynamite under the rig?"

"That's what I was wonderin' myself," said Triggerheel. "The next minute when I looked over toward the well, one of the lanterns was out. I thought maybe you'd come back and was tinkerin' with the lights, but I dived into my tent and got m' six-shooter and poled off over this way. I didn't want to shoot, for I thought it might be you, and before I could hardly bat m' eye the other lantern begun to blink, but I saw a arm reachin' around from back of the timber, and I knowed it wasn't yourn. I turned loose on 'im, and he come back at me, and we had it back'ard and fo'ward a time or two, me a runnin' up on him at every jump. But shucks, no man ain't as fast as danamite. It was done before I'd went forty feet."

"Well, you did all a man could be expected to do under the circumstances," said Ared.

"I follered him," said Triggerheel, "but he was a younger man'n me, and he outrun me. Had a horse tied out there in the road, and he hopped it and got away. It was funny, too."

"What was?"

"The way that feller run," sad the old man, as if pondering it. "Seems to me I've knowed a feller somewheres that had a run like that, and it seems to me that the set of that feller on his horse was

familiar to me, too. But dang my melt if I can—
Oh, well!"

"You're sure about the light in the window?"
asked Ared.

"Dead sure," replied Triggerheel.

"What do you make of it?"

"I was just wonderin'," said the old man. "Maybe they've talked the old woman over—it wouldn't 'a' been much of a job—and she was to signal 'em when you was at the house. They wouldn't likely want to tackle you, but I reckon they figger I don't count."

"No," said Ared, after pondering it a while, and finding no room for suspicion in his generous mind, "I can't believe she had anything to do with it, Triggerheel. She just happened to move the lamp. She came out of her room just about that time, and was talking with Pardner and me at the door when the first shot was fired."

"Well, maybe she never," said Triggerheel, assenting, but unconvinced.

Daylight discovered to Ared that the shattered timber could not be spliced again upon itself. It would have to be replaced outright for its greater length, and he had no money to buy the material.

The only thing that offered a way out was to go to the river, where the cottonwoods grew tall, and hunt a slender one, from the trunk of which he could cut the required timber. Instead of two days, it might take three, and oil yet a hope almost as far

away as on the first day that he drilled. It looked that dun morning as if they had lost the race.

Leaving Triggerheel in charge to guard what remained of the plant, Ared drove away while the morning was yet grey.

He was back at the works by dusk, a forty-foot tree trunk slung under the axles of the wagon. It was the best that he could find, but he believed that he could, with planks and bolts, brace enough of the broken timber together to make it serve until the completion of the well. After a hasty supper he went to work, Triggerheel standing guard at the boiler shed, his high-slung pistols ready to his hand.

Jo Ryland came down late. More than once he had speculated on her absence, and wondered what had happened to shut her in the house so closely. Now, as she held the lantern for him, she explained.

"I saw you leaving this morning," said she, "but I didn't want to waste your time asking you what you were going to do. I knew it would be the wisest and best thing, whatever it might be."

"Well, I hope so," said he.

"I was afraid you might think that I'd lost interest in the work," she said, "but I couldn't leave mother a minute last night after those scoundrels set off the dynamite. She was frightened almost out of her senses."

"Quite naturally," said he.

"But this afternoon, when she quieted down, I rode

over to town and put this thing up to the sheriff. I demanded protection against these outrages, but I might as well have gone to the graveyard and talked to a tombstone. He said it was a job for a private watchman."

"But what did he have to say about trying to find out who the dynamiters are?" asked Ared, straightening up from his task.

"He didn't seem to believe there were any dynamiters at all," said she.

Ared bent again to shaping the mortised joint in the timbers with his adze, Jo flashing the light on his work.

"I met Mr. Sandford as I was coming home, and I pitched into him as savage as a wolf," said she. "I told him to stand out in the clear and fight like a man, and you could have knocked his eyes off his face with a board. That man can simulate innocence to beat anything I ever met!"

"He didn't even know anything about this last attack, I suppose?"

"No; he was as innocent as a lamb. He said we'd find out in time that his company had no interest in this lease, didn't want it, wouldn't have it at any price. He offered to help us out in any way that he could—even to sending men to stand guard over here at night."

"Does he still want to—marry you?" asked Ared, looking up at her suddenly.

"He's still carrying on negotiations with mother

—he's never approached me directly in the matter," she returned. "I don't believe he's sincere even in that."

"You wouldn't marry him, anyhow," said he decisively. "He's not your kind of a man."

"Oh, no telling," she said lightly.

Jo seemed to be in very good spirits, in spite of the dark outlook. Ared liked her all the better for that, not knowing how many tears she had spent that day, nor how the clouds had seemed to lift from her heart as she saw him returning through the evening gloom.

"You didn't sleep any last night, Mr. Jeffries said," she told him.

"Well, neither did he."

"Don't you think you'd better let this go till morning, Ared?" she asked in that plaintively tentative way of a woman when she suggests a thing, yet hopes that it will not be done.

"There are ten good hours between now and day," he answered.

"But you'll have to take some rest."

"When we bring in the well," said he.

He straightened up from his hewing a moment.

"I tell you, Jo, I feel like an ant, building for those outlaws to tear down," he said. "I'm not going to take either my hands or my eyes off this work again until we're down where we started to go. Now you'd better run back to the house—this is a rough kind of a night."

She left him, and went scurrying up the hill as nimbly as a squirrel.

All through that night and the next day he laboured without pause at his task of restoring the crippled derrick. Jo marvelled in admiration of his strength and endurance, but trembled in the fear that the labour and exposure might break his health.

It was some time in the third night of this ceaseless labour that Jo started from her bed conscious of a familiar sound. She hastened to the window, and softly raised the sash. Yes, the engine was going again. Ared had finished his repairs, and was filling out the night with the drill.

Triggerheel, who had grown to be quite a competent driller in those weeks, relieved him after breakfast, and Ared turned in for a sleep. But four days remained to them now, and it was Ared's intention to run the drill day and night.

Jo had insisted that she be allowed to enter the lists as an active participant in the final dash. She had enlisted herself as cook, and that day Triggerheel took his meals standing at the mouth of the well.

Ared relieved him at sunset, and scolded him roundly because the old man had allowed him to sleep so long. Even then Triggerheel refused to turn in.

"I just feel like I want to hang around," said he. "I'll keep up steam for you."

It was well into the shank of the night when Trig-

gerheel, coming down from the boiler shed with his pipe fresh lit, stopped while yet a rod from the well, sniffed the wind, dumped the fire out of his pipe, and ground it under his heel.

"Don't you smell it?" he asked excitedly. "She's through. I tell you; we're down to the sand!"

"I could tell by the feel of it that she was through about five minutes ago," said Ared, "and I thought I scented it, but I wouldn't let myself believe it."

There was no mistaking the acrid odour which was growing stronger now in the casing of the well.

"It's oil!" said Ared, almost awed by the discovery.

"You mighty right it's oil," the old man said. "Got to keep every glimmer of a blaze away from here now, 'count of that gas. I reckon we better shut down till mornin'."

"It's the closest I ever came to oil, and I've drilled many a weary hole," said Ared, shutting off the steam.

But there was no lifting of triumph in his achievement as a personal victory, no thrilling satisfaction in that first moment over the thought of what it would mean to Josephine Ryland. Heiskell saw in his almost-finished task that hour only the dawning of his world victories in the name of her whom he had exalted on the altar of his dreams.

CHAPTER XII

SOLOMON'S BLIGHT

WE'VE won, in spite of them!" said Jo, flushed and triumphant, as she watched the black oil drip from the bit of the hoisted drill next morning.

"Not just yet," said Ared. "We've got to bring in a 'producing' well, under the terms of your contract, you remember. The oil stands several hundred feet deep in the bore this morning, but my hope was that we'd get a well that we wouldn't have to pump. I'll go to town this morning and fetch a shooter out. We'll have him give her a big charge—six or ten gallons—and maybe we can shake her loose."

"If you'll let a old feller put in his oar——" suggested Triggerheel, waiting there for permission.

"Cut loose!" encouraged Ared.

"Yes, you're one of the partners," smiled Jo.

"Well, then, I was goin' to say you might make arrangements for a pump while you're over there in town," the old man said. "If she don't run, we can h'ist 'er out, and if you put even one barrel on top of the ground a day you've got a perducin' well, and I'd like to see the lawyer that could argy *that* down."

"It's a wise thought," admitted Ared. "I'll arrange for one, and if we need it we can bring it out."

They were in high spirits that morning, everybody talkative, even Ared. There was a gleam of excitement in his placid eyes, a flush on his weather-beaten face. And Jo, who had been paling under the strain, was as fresh as a morning-glory.

"Your eyes is so bright, Pardner, I'm afraid they'll set off a spark and fire the well," said Triggerheel, with great gravity.

Jo's pleasurable flush deepened at the sincere compliment, but Triggerheel saw that her eyes sought Ared's face, as if her heart was telling him how dear even that simple praise would have been if it had come from him.

Ared was standing in one of his trances. He had excluded the world and all within it from what he saw that moment, and there were no eyes to share his vision with him. Jo's breast lifted in a sigh which she stifled on her lips, and the smile died in old Triggerheel's eyes.

"I'll go and hitch up the team for you, Ed," said he.

"All right," said Ared, coming back to his duty with a start.

"Wonder who that feller is?" said Triggerheel, throwing his head up like a steer sniffing a stranger in the wind.

The others turned and looked with him toward the road. A man was that moment lifting the crest

of the hill, and when he had mounted to the top he paused. He was a tall, rugged man, with long hair blowing, a long staff in his hand. He seemed weary, and his hands were clasped on the stick, against which he leaned heavily.

"I don't know," said Jo. "I never——"

"My father!" said Ared, bounding away over shrub and stone to meet him.

There was no thought of past differences in Ared's mind that moment. It was enough that his father had sought him, even though he stood afar off, like David, uncertain of the welcome for which he yearned.

The strong wind of the winter morning was tugging at the old man's long coat; he leaned against the blast like one breasting a swift current. When he saw his son coming toward him, he stretched out a hand and let his long staff fall to the ground. It was as if he felt that a living pillar of strength was being offered him to lean upon, and that the forest prop would be needed no more.

Solomon Heiskell clung to his son's hand, holding it between both his own.

"My little son," said he, tears on his sad old face, "my little son!"

Thus they stood a little while. Ared placed his arm sustainingly about the old man's shoulders, and urged him below the hill, out of the force of the wind.

When Jo Ryland saw them coming, she turned

toward the house. There was room for others in Ared's great heart, but no place for her. No matter for the promise of the well that hour, the light of her life seemed obscured, and the hope of the future touched with a mildew, the colour drained out of it, like a bright fabric which has lashed to tatters in a scourging storm. She walked sadly away, the betrayal of her drooping spirit in her lagging steps. Triggerheel looked after her, and shook his wise old head.

"Some can see with their eyes open, and some can't," said he. "Ed he's one of the kind that can't."

Ared brought the old man down to the warm boiler house, and tried to settle him comfortably there. He felt in his heart that his father was the messenger of disaster in his own affairs, but he was so weak and weary, and numbed from the exposure of his long tramp from the railroad over, that Ared pressed him to go to bed at once and refresh himself.

The old man resolutely refused.

"There's no use staving it off, son," said he. "I have come to throw my broken pride at your feet and confess that you were right and I was wrong. My castle of sand is in ruins. That fellow Drumm has absconded with every cent of the money, and I am left alone to stand answerable for this gigantic swindle."

Ared smothered an imprecation. "When did he leave? I'll track him—I'll bring him back!"

"No; he's too far ahead of us to hope to bring

him back, son. He left three days ago, and before this he's on the water, bound for a foreign shore. He is gone, and the money of widows, of ministers of the gospel, working girls, orphans, is gone with him, and I am a felon in the eyes of the law!"

"I wish I'd gone to Kansas City when I received your letter; I felt that I should—I felt it!" said Ared in poignant regret, walking nervously up and down the cluttered shed.

"Aye, if you had!" said the old man.

"But it can't be mended now; we've got to stand up to it like men," said Ared. "Now tell me all about it."

"We sold about twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of stock in the company," sighed Solomon, shaking his head ruefully, "and Drumm was to have thirty per cent of the gross, paying all advertising bills himself. I trusted the man completely—he had bank references—so completely that I put everything into his hands. I failed to insist on an accounting, although it was agreed between us at the beginning that I should have a complete statement of receipts and disbursements at the end of each week, together with the amount of cash coming to me from sales of stock. I just allowed the matter to run on, accepting his excuses, which he offered in what seemed an honest and manly way now and then, that he was too busy to make up his books.

"'Let's get the drill going first; that's the important thing,' he used to say at the beginning. After

that it was something else, in which I always agreed, for he was skilled in making tenable excuses, in the responsibility of which I always seemed to have a share. He told me that he had bought machinery, showed me the receipted bills for it, in fact—and hired experts to carry on the work here. He had various men in the office at times, and one in particular whom he introduced to me as his expert driller, who had worked for him in other fields. But they were all frauds, all a part of his deep, well-organised scheme to defraud not alone those hundreds of innocent investors, but myself as well. I believed, until I arrived here yesterday, that the rascal had at least bought the machinery and put men to work on the old well, after the repeated declarations of his—our—advertisement.”

“In spite of what I wrote you!” Ared could not stop the exclamation, though regretful of its utterance.

“I spoke to Drumm about it at the time,” the old man said, “and you will understand how completely he had me dazzled and blinded when I accepted the explanation that he made. He pointed out that you did not state, of your own knowledge, but upon what you termed ‘reliable authority,’ that the work was not going on. He quieted my suspicions by saying that your informant probably had not been near the place in weeks. But you were there—you knew.”

“No, not at the time of writing, but later I went over. This is our old boiler; I brought it over a

short time ago, following an accident to my own," said Ared.

"I thought there was something familiar about it. Well, it has swallowed many a hard-earned dollar of both yours and mine, lad. I hope it may return interest on the old investment, as well as the new."

"I hope so," said Ared fervently.

"I missed it yesterday from its place among the bushes," said Solomon, "and I thought some of these pirates had hauled it off."

"Your creditors will be down on you in a flock more than likely. We must get ready to meet them, and arrange some kind of an adjustment."

"Yes, I expect not alone the poor, deluded people who put money into the scheme to track me and confront me, but the United States officers as well. The postal authorities will be quick to act, for most of our business was transacted through the mails."

"What are your plans?" asked Ared.

"I'll turn over the property to the stockholders, such as it is, if you think it's the thing to do," Solomon replied.

"It might look to them like adding insult to robbery," said Ared, with bitter memories rising of his wasted years on those bleak hillsides.

"They might look at it in that light," admitted Solomon. "Its promises are not as golden, even to me, to-day as they once were."

"Well, whatever the worst may be, I'll stand up to it with you and take my share."

"Your share? You have no share in it; you are clean of the spattering of this disgrace, thank God!" said Solomon, bowing his head upon his hands.

"The obligation rests on the name," said Ared. "If things turn out here as I hope they may I'll have something with visible value to quiet them until we can turn around."

Solomon inquired about the work under way, and Ared laid the situation before him in a few words.

"And you're down to oil!" said Solomon, his eyes lighting up with eagerness.

"At last I've sniffed the smell of it on my own drill," nodded Ared.

"Then your fortune's made!" declared Solomon, thrilling with pleasure.

"My foot is in the door," said Ared. "Whether I shall ever pass myself remains for time to show. But my hope is strong."

Solomon got to his feet, and buttoned his coat about his chin.

"I'll go my way," said he earnestly, looking gravely into his son's face, "before my shadow blights the promise of your success. I'm an unlucky man."

"You'll be going back to the old place?" asked Ared.

"Back to the old place," the old man echoed. "They'll come there to find me, and accuse and upbraid me, and I must meet them there, and face them like an honest man. It will be in the papers in a day

or two, for I left a notice on the door of that disgraced office, telling any who may seek me where I am to be found."

"That was the one open course," said Ared approvingly. "You have nothing to hide from, nobody to evade, for you haven't wronged anybody intentionally. When I put this work through to a finish, and bring oil to the top of the ground, which I hope to do to-day or to-morrow, I'll join you, and we'll see what can be done."

"You'd better stand clear, son," said Solomon, placing his hand on Ared's shoulder, "and keep out of my shadow. Misfortune follows me."

Triggerheel drove up, and presently came stamping in, ice on his moustache, his nose blue. Solomon was for striking off across the fields on a short cut to the old place, and it was only when Ared took him by the arm and led him to the wagon that he yielded. Even then he took his place with muttered protest.

"Bad luck is like money; it engenders its kind," said he. "I've never set my hand to anything that prospered."

Ared saw Mrs. Ryland at the window as they drove past the house, but Jo was not in sight. The old woman held her curtain aside and looked after them, jealous, it seemed to Ared, in her selfish, small way, of the confidence between father and son in which she had no share.

"I used to sit in the private office," said Solomon, "among the fine furnishings which Drumm bought

on credit and did not pay for, you may be sure, and talk to the prospective investors who came in to do business at first hand. I believed in the undertaking with all my heart, and I fear that I have convinced a good many people, and caused them to part with their money against their better judgment.

"This was particularly true of ministers and women. School-teachers, too. They used to come in pretty thick, but more ministers than anybody else, poor fellows. There were a great many women, too, and there was one lass that I remember with a pang. She had dove's eyes, as the Hebrew singer says, and my heart was warm toward her, thinking of you. We took her patrimony, and it is gone, and we took the earnings of widows and the small savings of young men, blasting many a hope and planting the seeds of discouragement and future carelessness in many a breast. It was wrong, cruelly, criminally wrong, but I believed in it from my soul."

"I know you did," said Ared, his pity straining to pain, knowing as he knew the depth of his father's humiliation and regret.

"But how can I go to prison, I, who have been a free man all my days!" said Solomon, with sudden vehemence, opening his long arms to the cruel wind in his unanswered appeal. "I couldn't live in prison air a day—not an hour—my heart would wither in my breast for shame!"

"It hasn't come to that," comforted his son.

"It will," said Solomon, with prophetic finality.

Ared put the old man down at the station in Oil City, and he turned his face resolutely toward the abandoned homestead in the hills. He had neither the spirit of dissimulation, nor the craft of the worldly, which many a man with no greater assets than Solomon Heiskell possessed at that hour has found sufficient to rehabilitate his fortunes and refund his enterprises. Solomon Heiskell was turning back to the place of his dreams to face like an honest man, and pass, perhaps for a rogue, all who might come against him with their claims. He had nothing to pay them, but he had nothing to hide.

Ared stood looking after him as he buffeted his way onward against the wind, until he passed out of sight at a turn of the street. A new necessity had come into his life that morning; it called loudly above the pleasant music of his long dream. There might be no song at twilight for him now; the singer who raised her eyes as one under a holy benediction never might lift her voice to reward the constancy of his heart. If there was fortune for him in his share of the Ryland lease, it must go first to restore what had been taken from the public in his father's name.

He prayed that it might come, that it might turn out greater than his highest hope. If he could satisfy the investors in his father's sad scheme that their money would be returned in full within a few months, the old man might thus be saved from the shame of prison, for if there was none to lodge a complaint of fraud, there could be no prosecution.

So Ared turned about the business ahead of him in eagerness, and for the next few hours he did some of the hardest, and most barren, work of his life.

It was dusk when he drove back, and flung the lines to Triggerheel, who was waiting him. Ared was in a humour strange to him, as far as Triggerheel's experience counted. He seemed sour, and disposed to smash things. He slammed on the brake of the wagon and leaped to the ground, beating his numb hands across his breast like a wood-chopper.

"Damn them!" said he, beating away as if to knock the breath out of his body. "Damn them, Triggerheel, they've bottled us up!"

It was the first time Triggerheel ever heard him swear. Feeling that, as it had been so long coming, it must portend something mighty important, the old man nodded, encouragingly.

"Go to it, son," said he.

"There's not a well-shooter in this district that'll touch this job," said Ared, "and not a quart of nitroglycerin to be bought for love or money."

"You don't tell me!" said Triggerheel, raising his shaggy eyebrows.

"I've been up against some things in this world, pardner, but——my——eyes if this——outfit that runs this country don't beat any cast-iron combination you can name!"

Triggerheel brought the end of the lines around and slapped himself sharply across the thighs, his face lighting up like he was hearing news from home.

"Go to it I tell you—it does me good to hear you!" said he.

The long-quiet fire was raging in the slow-spoken, mild-eyed young man's breast. He flung his long arms and called down confusion on the big company, and the heads that guided it in that benighted land.

"I trotted up and down that——street over there till my——feet were hot; I rammed my nose against the bars like a wolf in a cage," said Ared, "but I couldn't overtake anybody that hadn't been seen by some of that gang ahead of me, and I couldn't shove in a door of any blink-eyed, whey-brained, shaggy-legged mother's son of a storekeeper anywhere along that street that hadn't sold the last drop of his——hell-fired soup just the minute before I got to him! I tell you I'm tired of it, Triggerheel, and I'm one man in this county of jack-asses that's goin' to rair up and buck this load of——grafters off in the mud!"

"A-a-men!" said Triggerheel. "I didn't know it was in you, Ed, dang m' old dried-up skilletin, I didn't know it was in you!"

"There's nothing to be had in that man's town that'll help us put a barrel of oil on top of the ground in time to save this option," said Ared, cooling down in a measure, perhaps a bit ashamed of himself on account of Triggerheel's enthusiastic applause.

"No soup, no shooters, no machinery—no nothin', heh?" said Triggerheel.

"Machinery hell!" exploded Ared, the volcano beginning to boil again. "I tell you there isn't even a piece of wire in that town that any of us up here could buy. Fleming's put his——foot down on everything, and he's got all those storekeepers down there humped up with their tails between their legs like a pack of hounds."

"Yes, all he's got to do is crack the whip, I told you that some time ago, Ed."

"I didn't realise the extent of his ownership until to-day, though. I tell you, Triggerheel, it's as absolute as your title to that team. I never supposed that you could assemble a community of so-called free American citizens and put a yoke on them like that. It's beyond me, I don't understand it."

"Well, I can tell you," said Triggerheel. "They've bought property, and put up stores, and bought goods and stocked 'em, and all they've got 's staked on 'em. The big company can pull up stakes and kill this town any day it feels like it wants to put its thumb down and mash a passel of ants—it's done it to spite railroads, and others, time and agin down here in the oil country. What does it need that town for, ain't it got its pipe-lines runnin' from Gitout to Go-on? Sure it has."

"Well, I suppose that's the situation, but it's a one-hell of a state of affairs for anybody with a spark of manhood in him to endure," said Ared.

"So we're up agin it, are we?" said Triggerheel.

"Not by a —— sight!" snapped Ared.

"Well, what do you aim to do, Ed?"

"I'm going to take the ten o'clock train to Tulsa and get the material we need," replied Ared. "You meet me at the depot to-morrow evening with the wagon, for the stuff 'll come down on the train with me, by express."

"Pump and connections, and niterglycereen, and all?"

"I suppose I'll have to disguise the explosive in some way and carry it in the car with me, I don't believe I could ship it by express," said Ared, "but the rest of the stuff will be shipped."

"And you aim to walk over to town and ketch that there train, Ed?"

"Of course," said Ared, shortly, "you'll have to stay here to see that these——pirates don't sneak in and blow us up again."

"Yes, and you'd do it, too, and you'd tote that there soup with you, and you'd win out spite of hell and half o' Kansas, as the old man from Indianny said. Well, you don't need to do that, Ed; you don't need to stir a foot off of this place. You don't want no pump for that well, Ed; what you need's a valve."

Ared looked at him severely a moment, and Trigerheel nodded, affirming what he had said.

"I don't know what you mean," said Ared, pettishly, turning from him abruptly.

"I mean that she's come in on her own account, and she's runnin' a stream of oil as big as m' dang old leg!"

"You don't mean—what the devil *do* you mean?"

"She set up a gurglin' and gulpin' this mornin' about nine like a feller drinkin' out of a jug," the old man said, "and I just kind of hung around to see what was up, and d'reckly she busted, like a bile."

Ared had set off in the direction of the well, and Triggerheel talked as he swung his long legs to keep up with the young man's eager gait.

"Does Pardner know?" asked Ared.

"I went tearin' up that hill like a jack-ass rabbit as soon as I seen it was a gusher that'd come in, and not just a spurt of gas," said Triggerheel, "and down come Pardner, just as she took her hands out of the pie dough."

They were near the well now, and even in the thickening dusk the fountain of oil could be seen, rising and sinking in the casing.

"It's comin' stronger all the time," said Triggerheel, as they drew up beside it, "it's poppin' up higher now than it was a little while ago."

Ared was silent. It seemed as if the unexpected realisation on what had appeared a doubtful chance when he came back from the town but a few minutes before, had surprised the words out of his mouth like startled quail.

"I throwed a little dam acrost the holler down there about a hundred foot," Triggerheel pointed, "and it's collectin' there in a pond. Must be hip-deep by now."

Ared did not speak. He bent over the rising

and sinking stream of oil, drew off his sheep-skin mittens and tested the body of the product between finger and thumb.

"What did Pardner say?" he asked.

"Nothin' at first. When she seen that oil runnin' over the casin'—it wasn't nothin' like as strong then as it is now—she put her hands in it, and kind of handled it, like a feller would gold nuggets if he'd open a pocket of 'em after humpin' the gizzards out of him for forty years over a pick. She lifted it up in her little pa'ms and poured it out, and the tears come a gushin' over her face, and nobody here to kiss 'em off. I reckon if you'd 'a' been here then, Ed——"

"Well, it's real, anyhow," said Ared, releasing a great sigh, as if there had been obscurity of doubt over it until that moment.

"Harvard-Yale was over this afternoon," said Triggerheel, with a chuckle. "Them fellers can smell oil like a buzzard smells a mess laid out for him on the pe-rairie."

"What was he nosing around here after?" asked Ared, in belligerent spirit at the mention of Sandford's name.

"Come over to pay his respects to maw, I reckon," said Triggerheel. "Anyways, she come down here with him, and Pardner she come along, to see he didn't pull the well up by the roots and tote it off with him, I guess. He'd 'a' done it, too, if he could."

"What did he say?" asked Ared.

"He didn't say nothin' to me," said Triggerheel, "didn't reco'nise me, maybe. The old woman she ordered me off down there to throw up the dam a little higher, just like I was her hired-out hand by the day. Well, I won't jaw with no woman that ain't my wife, so I went, and what they said between 'em I don't know. Pardner she come to where I was shovellin' up the ground, lookin' painful about the eyes, and asked me to overlook the old lady's ways. If the old woman 'd 'a' ordered me to go to hell, I'd 'a' went whis'lin' after that, as the feller said."

"She's got a way about her, that little Jo," said Ared, his heart lighter than it had been in years.

"You're right she has!" said Triggerheel, feelingly.

"I'd like to use one of the horses after supper, they're not tired, they've just been standing around all day," Ared said.

"No matter if they was tired," said Triggerheel. "You goin' over to town?"

"Over that way," said Ared.

"I thought maybe you'd want to hang around here this evenin' and talk it over with Pardner," said Triggerheel, with a speculative shading of regret.

"No, I'm going to see my father," said Ared, his head up, his face averted, his voice low, as if he imparted a confidence to the winds; "I'm going to tell him that the Heiskell luck has changed."

CHAPTER XIII

"IT WAS PURTY"

THEY were back at the well again, Ared having gulped a hasty supper. The saddled horse was behind him, his arm through its bridle reins, ready for him to mount and carry the good news to old Solomon in his gloomy home. Triggerheel had denied himself his pipe, for he would not risk even a spark near the well. There was a small hook of a moon in the southwest, dodging in and out among the thickening grey rack which blew up from the distant gulf.

"I'm agoin' to stick to this well like chawin' wax to a cheer," said Triggerheel, "and never take m' eye off of it till you come back. If they want to blow up the b'iler now, let 'em go on and blow, but they won't."

"Not likely," Ared agreed. "I'll be back by midnight and relieve you. I wouldn't go at all but for the pleasure it will give my father to know that daylight's breaking over here. His big scheme has all gone up in a whirlwind, just as we thought it would go."

"The fiscalin' feller skinned out with the collection, heh?"

"Yes, he cleaned out the barrel to the bottom."

"That's the main part of the trade of fiscalin'. 'Most anybody can take in money on a scheme like that, but it takes one of them financ-ers you read about to git away with it clean."

"Well, that one knew his business then," Ared allowed.

"Gone, has he?" said Triggerheel speculatively. "Huh, might 'a' knowed it'd turn out that-a-way!"

"Yes, such schemes usually do."

"Well, he's got a hundred of mine along in his gripsack," Triggerheel sighed.

"How's that? You don't mean——"

"Yes, I fell for that feller's promise of big money for the widders and orphans," the old man admitted, grinning sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, Triggerheel——"

"I ain't a-sheddin' no tears over it, anyhow," interrupted Triggerheel loftily. "Money goes, no matter how tight you hold it, and it'd 'a' got out of my hands some other way by now, I reckon. It was a chance, and I took a shot."

"When did you send the money? If you'd come to me before——"

"It was the day I brung the paper up to you. I read that feller's talk over once, and it seemed to me I could feel the money beginnin' to swell in m' pocket like seeds in the ground; I read it ag'in, and

dang m' old melts, Ed, if I didn't feel like I was a coward to hang onto it with that chance a-darin' me to come on. That was before I seen Purty, and I loped off to the post office and sent that fiscaler a money order for a hundred dollars. Well, let it go—I ain't carin' a durn!"

"I'll make it good to you," said Ared, grimly positive.

"You will—not!" growled Triggerheel resentfully. "I ain't around askin' no man to pay me back money I put up on another feller's game."

"All right; we'll let it drop for the present."

"For *good!* I've got ten thousand shares of that paper, and it's as purty paper as you ever set your eyes on, Ed."

"I think Pardner's coming," said Ared, listening.

"Yes, I heard her shut the door a minute ago," said Triggerheel.

She came out of the thicker gloom which bordered the path as they were speaking.

"I just *had* to come down for another look at it," she excused herself, coming up to where they stood.

"Well, it's something worth looking at," said Ared. "And to think of it being so obliging as to come in with a head like that while I was tearing around on my fruitless hunt for 'soup'!"

"It seems to me that it's bigger and bigger every time I see it," she laughed.

"That's because it is, honey," said Triggerheel.

"Well, say, I'm goin' to run over to m' tent and take

a draw on m' pipe while you two plan what you're goin' to do with your money, if you can spare me a minute?"

"Go ahead," granted Ared.

"I had to come down to assure myself that it was still going," said Jo seriously. "I don't know how I'll be able to live through the night, dreaming every time I shut my eyes that the oil has turned to water, or that the reality is only a dream itself. I'm glad—doubly glad—for your sake, Ared, that it has turned out so well."

"Thank you, little Pardner," said he, straight from the heart.

"You're just about starting somewhere; don't let me keep you," said she.

"I am going to carry the big news," he told her seriously.

"I hope that she—they," said Jo in soft, halting words, "will be as happy for your sake as I am, Ared."

"It's to my father; mother has long been dead," said he persistently, and, it seemed, permanently blind.

"Oh, he was here this morning, looking so lonely and heartbroken I thought as he stood there on the hill waiting for you to come. You must go to him—you must hurry!"

He did not mark the new lightness, the new eagerness, in her tones.

"He has failed to realise on one of his fondest ex-

pectations," he told her sadly, as if speaking of the dead.

"You must carry this cheer to him," said she, in pity.

"Yes; it will warm his heart this winter night," said he flinging the reins over the horse's neck, his foot seeking the stirrup eagerly in the dark.

Jo went back to the house as the sound of galloping hoofs passed out of her hearing, feeling repaid for all the maiden modesty that she had hazarded in that simple interview. Perhaps there was no other she; perhaps his big, honest heart was still green, and wanting the effulgent beams of love to ripen it to its glory. Perhaps it yielded slowly, like an autumnal fruit, and its endurance, in human season, would be as long.

Ared, riding onward through the night which thickened overhead and threatened snow, was far beyond the warm little circle which radiated from Jo's longing heart. Poor little Jo did not march in the procession of his fancy that hour, as he built and fashioned in extravagant joy.

Jane Sloane, the beautiful singer with the homely name, seemed nearer to him that night than he had hoped to come to her in years. Only a little while now and he could go to her in fortune and independence, boldly and confidently, as she had come to him in her trust, that night of her peril and poverty.

He did not pause to consider that she was a

stranger, and that time and distance had made her even more strange; he did not question whether she loved him, for in his long dream he had come at length to accept that as a founded and unquestionable fact. She had left her token with him, her virginal troth. So he thought of her now only as waiting, her heart softened to blend, at meeting, with his own. Soon he could go now. There was triumph in it, and great joy.

It was past midnight when Ared returned. The night had grown warmer, and a mist was in the wind, giving false proportions to objects in the near landscape, drawing a grey silence over the distance. The black timbers of the derricks at wells along the roadside stood out like the foundations of gigantic structures in the eye-deceiving mist, their tops hidden in the vapours which had blown there from the steaming cauldron of the Gulf, eight hundred miles away.

There was a light in the Ryland house as he passed, at which he wondered, and as he rode down to the canvas stable to put the horse up, he heard Triggerheel's voice in his old, doleful melody:

"I'm a reavin', I'm a rovin',
I'm a rairin' young blade——"

The sound came from the direction of Triggerheel's tent, but no light showed in it. Ared approached it cautiously, in the fear of tripping over a

rope, and in front of it he stopped and hailed the singer.

Triggerheel opened the flap, and the light of the lantern, which stood in an upended box, revealed the old man kneeling beside a pallet upon which a man lay stretched. Triggerheel held a hairbrush in his hand, hovering over the prostrate man's face, which was in shadow.

"Oh, it's Purty," said Ared, his disgust unhidden.

"Yes, it's him," returned Triggerheel, with a sadness, and a portent of something unrevealed, in his voice which caused Ared to start.

"Why, what's happened?" he asked, bending forward, his hand on the tent-flap.

"The pore boy he was misled to come sneakin' around here and take a shot at me," said the old man.

"Did he hit you—are you hurt?" inquired Ared, in alarm.

"No, he didn't git me," said Triggerheel, "but I banged away, not knowin' who it was, and slammed a bullet through his lights."

"Well, you seem sorry you hit him," said Ared, the scorn for Triggerheel's outlandish softness for this villainous fellow finding expression in his tones, "but I think he got what was coming to him. Is he dead?"

"No, but he will be before daylight," said Triggerheel, sadly.

"I'll take the other horse and go to town for a doctor," Ared said, turning away.

"No need; Pardner she rode over to Harvard-Yale's camp and sent a telefoam in for one. But he said he couldn't come before mornin', and I don't reckon he could do nothin' for pore old Purty if he was to come now. Pardner she's standin' watch over the well, but I don't suppose anybody else 'll butt in around here to-night."

The old man stooped over his protégé, who would have been his murderer but for the uncertain shadows around the well, and stroked his moustache with the brush. Ared turned the box which sheltered the lantern rays from Purty's face, and the yellow gleam fell over the pallet of blankets.

Purty was drawing his breath with a blubbering sound, indicating that the wounded lung was fast filling with blood. His face was pallid, and his mouth stood open, but his eyes were closed, and he lay as one dead. Ared saw that the old man was right about the tenure which Purty held on the tenement of life. Before another hour ended he would be called up to account for his ingratitude and treachery.

It was touching to see the old man's tenderness, and pitiful to witness his sorrow. He stroked the dying rascal's foolish moustache with gentle hand, and in the lantern light Ared saw tears dropping down, big and glistening, upon Purty's undeserving chest. Ared moved the box around to face the tent

wall again, and Purty stirred, throwing a hand from under the blanket.

"Sh-h-h-h!" whispered the old man, like a mother soothing a restless child. Then he began to sing:

"I'll tune up my fiddle,
I'll ros-um my bow,
And I'll make my-self wel-come
Where-ever I go-o-o."

It was the same tune to which Triggerheel pitched all his songs, or perhaps a continuation merely of his one interminable piece, far-carrying, tremulously minor; a tune which cow-herders have sung on the night watches from the Rio Grande to the North Platte for fifty years.

"That used to soothe and quiet the boy," said Triggerheel apologetically, "along with breshin' his murstash, when he was in his worst spells of the Lonesome Willies. But I don't reckon it'll ever put the old feller to sleep no more."

"Did he tell you anything—who hired him to do it, or anything like that—before he became unconscious?"

"Yes, he told me all about it. Fleming hired him to put the danamite in the coal. Them was Purty's tracks I thought was a woman's—his foot takes a number five. I thought them tracks was littler than that, but he was wearin' woman's shoes that night, he said. I beg the old lady's pardon for the suspicion I had of her."

"Still, you suspected Purty at the time," said Ared, recalling what the old man had said then about knowing a man with a foot that small.

"Yes, I suspicioned Purty; it was a trick his size," sighed the old man, "for when booze drives a feller he never knows where or when to stop. He'll go through blood and fire, and he'll go through hell an' blazes. Well, that time I saw him hop his horse after he blowed up the rig I knowed him. But I never thought that even booze would drive him to lift his hand agin' his one best friend."

"He's a yellow dog, clear to his rotten heart!" said Ared.

"Well, maybe so, maybe so," sighed the old man, "but he's about to start out on the long drive now, and I'd 'a' give m' best leg, Ed, if it'd 'a' been some other feller's bullet that done it."

"Sandford hired him to even up the score with you, after he saw that he couldn't block us on the oil, did he?"

"Well, you know, they had the pore feller on his back, as you might say, hangin' over the aidge of hell and tarnation. They told him if he didn't do it they'd tip off to you who blowed up the b'iler and the rig, and he'd go over the road for the rest of his days. 'Sides, Purty he had to have booze. He'd 'a' walked up the side of a house after booze, and he'd 'a' div' off of Pike's Peak after it."

"Yes, it's just like Sandford to put up a deal like that," said Ared, thinking of his negotiations for

the hand of Jo Ryland as an imp aspiring to paradise.

"No, Harvard-Yale he wasn't man enough to tackle the job with his own little gun, so he put up that pore, deluted boy to do it. Well, well; it's done!"

"I'll go over and send Pardner to bed," said Ared. "There's no use watching the well any more to-night; they've done all they'll do."

Jo was walking a beat that she had laid out on the little level beside the well. She was as steady as a clock, but deeply moved by the old man's sorrow over the end which Purty had brought upon himself.

"He's been singing that way ever since he carried the sneaking assassin to his tent," said she. "He says there's a bond between them that no act of that fellow's can break, no matter how treacherous and mean."

"It's all on one side," said Ared. "The man's a drunkard and a thief, to my knowledge, and I don't know what else. He's the fellow who's been planting the dynamite around here—he was conscious long enough to tell the old man that. Whether it was one white spot in his soul that lifted him up to the confession, or whether it was the boast of a scoundrel past redemption, I don't know."

"Let us give him credit for the white spot," said she, softly, turning to listen to Triggerheel's song.

"Yes, I'll grant him that," said he. "What did Sandford say when you went over to telephone for

the doctor—when he heard that his lieutenant had been shot, I mean?”

“He wasn’t there,” said she, “nobody but the watchman. Sandford motors in to town every night.”

“Yes, of course. He’s one of these luxurious pioneers,” said Ared.

“What do you suppose Triggerheel will do if his ward, or whatever the man is to him, dies?”

“I’m afraid to think of it,” said he.

“Oh, the cuck-oo’s a pur-ty bird,
And she brings us good ch-ur,
But she nev-er sings cook-o-o-o
Till the spring of the yu-r-r-r.”

So Triggerheel’s song rose, and Ared heard a little sob in the misty darkness close at hand.

“God bless him for his tender, faithful heart!” said she.

“And reward him, too, with a worthy friendship,” he added. “Let me take you to the house—it’s uncertain footing in this fog.”

When Ared returned from escorting Jo to her door, the light was out in Triggerheel’s tent, and the sound of the old man talking to his horses came softly through the fog. Ared sought him, and found him harnessing his team.

“I’m goin’ in after a coffin for that boy,” said he.

There he paused, and Ared heard him swallowing, as if drinking his own sad tears.

"On your account, I'm sorry," Ared said.

"Well, I reckon Purty wasn't worth no grievin' after," the old man said. "There'll be coroner's inquests, and sheriff's inquiries, I reckon, before I can lay him away to rest. But you and Pardner, you'll stand by a old feller and see him through, Ed?"

"We'll do more than stand by; we'll stand under and lift with you," said Ared, feeling out in the dark for the old man's hand. "We've already forgotten everything about Purty except that you were his friend."

CHAPTER XIV.

A WOMAN'S WORD

MORNING discovered an increased strength in the flow of the well. The first misty light of dawn showed the reservoir which Triggerheel had hastily provided for the waste by damming the gully, to be almost filled to the top of the barrier. Ared roughly estimated that the well was running not less than five hundred barrels a day. That meant somewhere around one hundred dollars a day as his share, if they could find a buyer for the oil.

That question had not stood out very large in his future during the days when he had laboured at the well, for it was a bridge, as he had told Fleming, to be crossed when he came to it. Now he was up to the stream which divided him from prosperity and independence, and not even a bridge in sight.

It was certain that Fleming's company would not buy the oil. Fleming had told him that in as many words, and he had made the threat also that Heiskell never would realise any money out of that venture. The thing to do now, having made the leasehold secure for Jo and her mother, was to put a valve

in the well and shut it off, and then find somebody who would buy them out.

The morning had come on mistily, with clouds raking the nearby hills as they came over from the south. The little valleys and low places were filled with draggled vapours, like torn, soiled fragments of the low-sweeping clouds. In spite of the present success and future promise, there was gloom over Heiskell's camp, and a feeling of tension, of strained unquiet, in his mind.

He told himself that the tragedy of last night, together with the labour and lack of rest of the preceding weeks, had thrown a false shadow to obscure the pleasure of his triumphant hour. Purty lay dead in Triggerheel's tent, but for him Ared had neither pity nor regret. An inquiry by the coroner would absolve the old man of blame, and it might also set a fire going in the direction of those even more guilty than the miserable fool who had lent himself to their vicious schemes.

Ared was weary, and heavy with sleep. There was still fire in the boiler, and the shed was warm. Sitting there in the vapours of his morning coffee he concluded that he would have time for a restoring nap before Triggerheel's return. Accordingly, he turned in, with everything on but his boots and coat.

A hand on his shoulder, and Triggerheel's excited voice in his ear, called him from his blank sleep. He sat up, his waking faculties returning to him with a

wrench, expecting, dimly, through the wrack of his sleep, to hear that some fresh outrage had been worked against them while he slumbered.

The sun had come out, and a beam of it illumined the disorder of the shed through the little window in the south. It also revealed in raw plainness to Ared's eyes Triggerheel and several other men, none of whom he knew. Triggerheel's face was white, his eyes staring, his mouth open, as if he had got a knife between his ribs.

"Ed, where is he, Ed?" he asked, breathlessly.

"He—who—well, I don't know what you mean!" said Ared, dazed, shaking the sleep off with a cold shudder.

"Purty—he ain't there, he's gone!" said Triggerheel.

"I'm the coroner," said one in the crowd, "I came over to investigate a killin', and find I've run into a mare's nest. Say, is that what you fellers call a joke?"

"Well, he was there, and dead enough for any coroner, too, the last time I looked into the tent," declared Ared, flashing up resentfully at the official's manner.

"How long ago was that?" inquired another man in a bearskin coat and large, cocoanut-fibre moustache.

"About six o'clock, just before I came in to make a pot of coffee," said Ared.

"Well, I'm the sheriff," said the moustache, "and

it don't look to me like you ever had a dead man in there, pardner."

"Wait till I get on my clothes," said Ared, out of patience with the whole unaccountable proceeding.

"He's gone, Ed; gone slick and clean!" said Triggerheel, unmeasurable agony in his voice.

"You're the same crowd that's been imaginin' all kinds of things over here, danamiters, and such as that," nodded the sheriff, eyeing Ared with severe disfavour.

"He ain't there, Ed, he ain't there!" said Triggerheel, distractedly.

Ared led the way to Triggerheel's tent. The place where the dead body of Purty had lain was empty, the blankets of which his pallet was made were gone.

"Well, where's your dead man?" asked the coroner, derisively.

"He didn't get up and walk away," said Ared, stooping to examine the ground.

There was no trace of trespassers around the tent, but then the ground was hard-frozen and clean. Careful men could have come and gone without leaving a track, and whoever had carried the body away had been all of that. They had not dropped anything, nor left behind even a straw with a blood-stain on it. The only trace of the tragedy remaining there was the trail made by Triggerheel when he carried the wounded man to the tent from the place where he had fallen.

Purty had been bleeding profusely, and the route over which Triggerheel had borne him was plainly marked. They followed it to its beginning, the old man pointing out where he stood when he fired the shot.

"Well, maybe you did," said the coroner, in loud, sceptical voice, "but you'll have to show me!"

"Miss Ryland, in the house up there, saw him; she can bear out what we have told you," said Ared, hotly. "What good would it do this man to tell you he'd shot the fellow if he hadn't? Jeffries had known him for years, and I had seen him before. He was here, I tell you, and he was dead."

"Well, none of us sees him now," said the sheriff. This drew a laugh from the squad which the coroner had brought along to serve as jury.

"It's because someone has carried the body away," Ared declared.

"Who'd do it?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"The people who hired him," said Ared, looking pointedly into the sheriff's eyes. "They'd be about the last people who'd want an inquest."

"There's not anybody in this county around hirin' people to do their shootin' for 'em," said the sheriff, haughtily, "or if there is, I never heard of 'em before."

"You don't act much like you're greatly interested in hearing of it now, either," said Ared.

"Oh, hell!" said the sheriff. He turned to the

coroner, who sniffed a sneer out of his stubby nose. "I guess we'd better go back to town, doc?"

"Yes, come on," said the coroner, walking away toward the two automobiles in which they had come.

"They made me come with 'em," said Triggerheel, watching them leave with a dazed expression, "but I'd already bought the coffin."

"You'd better go with them and get your money back on it," suggested Ared.

"No, I wouldn't ask them fellers for a ride," said Triggerheel, "and 'sides that, I want to look and search around. Maybe he—say, you don't reckon the old feller could 'a' got up and walked off somewheres, do you, Ed?"

There was a wistful appeal in the old man's eyes which told of the sad hope he held that Purty might still be alive.

"He wouldn't have carried the blankets with him, and cleaned up the floor that way," said Ared.

"No, they've carried the old feller off to git shut of the evidence agin' 'em," admitted the old man, shaking his head sadly. "If we ain't got no corpse to show we can't prove nothin', and we can't start no in-quiry."

"They had plenty of time between six o'clock and sunup, and the fog was so thick then that Pardner couldn't have seen them, even if she'd been on the lookout. It was my fault; I should have watched."

"It's just as well the way they come and got him, I reckon. Only I'm a coffin ahead."

"We couldn't have proved anything on them, anyhow," said Ared. "Purty's dying confession to you wouldn't have been admitted as evidence, I don't suppose. You've got to have such things down in writing and sworn to. They'll bury him, I suppose, and that's all we could have done."

"Well, I'll borry Pardner's horse and go in after m' team," said Triggerheel. "If that feller won't take the coffin back, I'll be in a hell of a fix with it on m' hands. Reckon I'll just have to haul it around till I *do* need it, sometime 'r other."

"I expect Pardner's taking a sleep this morning, too, or she'd have been down here," Ared surmised.

"More'n likely," allowed Triggerheel, "I met the old lady whackin' off to town with Harvard-Yale as we come out. I wondered then how she got away without Pardner, but she must 'a' slipped out while she was asleep."

"What do you suppose they're up to?" asked Ared, looking gravely into the old man's face.

Triggerheel shook his head.

"No tellin', but I don't see as there's anything they can put over on you now. You've got the grease, and the lease is as safe as a preacher's soul, as the man from Indianny said. Well, I'll just go on up and borry Pardner's horse, and ask her afterwards."

In a little while Ared saw the old man ride away, the stirrups of Jo's saddle let down to accommodate his long legs, his old hat flapping in rhythm with the

horse's swinging gait. It was not until he was beyond hail that it occurred to Ared that he should have sent in for a valve to shut off the waste from the well.

"Well, it means another trip later in the day," said he.

The well was showing stronger every hour, it seemed. Now, as he stood by watching it, the oil rose in a fountain out of the casing to the height of a foot or more, and a jet now and then reached so high that the heavy column broke and spattered in a shower several feet around.

Ared concluded that it would be well to disconnect the engine and remove it, for in case the well continued growing in volume the oil might make a mess of the machinery. He was at work on this, it being then about midday, when Jo came down, refreshed and rosy from her sleep.

He told her of the disappearance of Purty's body, the visit of the county officials, and their sarcastic challenge of the truth and sanity of everybody who believed they had taken part in the tragedy of the night past. She was scarcely more amazed to learn all this than she was to discover that she had slept through it all.

"Even mother went out while I snored," said she. "Have you seen her around anywhere?"

"Triggerheel met her going toward town with Sandford when he came out with the so-called sheriff and the others, along about ten," said he.

"I wonder what she went in for?" said she, drawing a frown of perplexity.

"Just for a ride, maybe," he suggested.

"Maybe," said she, with what seemed a doubtful reserve.

She stood by while he worked with pipe-wrench, disconnecting the steam line, plainly worried and uneasy in her mind. Now and then she looked up the hill to the point where the road came into view, her displeasure over her mother's morning excursion in her face.

"Has he stopped pestering you to marry him?" Ared asked her, rising up suddenly from his work.

"He's had mother trying to do some missionary work," said she, quite seriously. "They're coming, and it looks to me like—yes, it is—Fleming with them! What do you suppose that man wants?"

"No telling," said Ared, a sinking feeling of foreboding in his heart, unreasonable and unjustified as he knew it to be.

What harm could Fleming work against him now, indeed? There was the letter of the leasehold fulfilled, all in good season, in spite of the under-handed means which Fleming had employed to defeat him. There seemed nothing more of interest in the matter for the big man now, except that he come down from his high horse and negotiate for the purchase of the lease.

"Well, they're all heading this way, anyhow," said

Jo, a flutter in her heart, a cold sensation of hovering disaster settling over her.

Fleming was striding in the lead, his long overcoat blowing about his sturdy legs, which he set out with a stolidity that seemed to proclaim ownership of everything beneath his feet. Mrs. Ryland came after him, supported by Sandford's ready arm.

"Purty little well!" said Fleming, coming to a stop a rod distant from it, his legs wide apart, his hands on his hips. He nodded at Jo and Ared, the line of his cold mouth unbending, his wiry moustache, cut down to stobs, lending it severity and strength.

"Yes, purty a little well as I ever saw, Heiskell," said he, coming on. "Hi 'r y'u?"

"Very well," returned Ared, distantly.

Mrs. Ryland and Sandford approached, and Ared felt a coldness coming over his heart, like the still, gliding shadow of a cloud over the glad sunshine of meadow lands. The old woman removed her hand from Sandford's arm, and beckoned to her daughter, although she stood near enough for even the lightest word to carry.

"What is it, mother?" asked Jo, her voice trembling, the colour sinking out of her lips and cheeks.

"Come away from that man!" the old lady commanded, sharply.

"Heiskell, you divil with the ladies!" said Fleming, with a chuckle which moved in his throat, but did not disturb the blunt severity of his face.

"That will be enough of that sort," said Ared, quietly.

Fleming turned to him with a frown.

"I'll say something in a minute, young feller, that'll—Oh well!"

Sandford was attempting an aside with Jo, who stood near her mother, but she had no ear for his pleasantry, whatever it was. She looked in amazement at her mother, her eyes growing large.

"Mother, what does all this mean?" she asked.

"It means, my dotah, that I have taken the reins of my business into my own hands. I have been granted letters of administration over your fatha's estate by the cote," the old woman replied, with important severity, "and that I have sold the lease to Mr. Fleming and he is to take possession at once. That's exactly what it means."

"Purty little well," said Fleming, thoughtfully, as if to himself, looking at the mounting flow of oil.

"But—but—mother, you *couldn't* do that!" protested Jo, as if by the earnestness of her own honest soul she would repudiate this treachery and set all right once more.

"It's done!" said Mrs. Ryland triumphantly.

Sandford was standing by, a grin on his fat face. He must have seen the light die in Ared's eyes as the cloud of his foreboding became the hand of reality. Fleming said nothing more. He seemed content to wait until mother and daughter had come to an end between themselves, and he stood turning

his eyes about the property, as if calculating where he would put down more wells.

"There's a contract between Mr. Heiskell and us; we can't rob him in any such unprincipled manner as this, and I'll never consent to it, either!" said Jo, her face flaming with indignant anger.

"There's no writin'," said Mrs. Ryland coolly.

"No, but he has my word—our word, mother."

"Oh, a woman's word!" discounted Mrs. Ryland impatiently. She faced Ared defiantly. "My dotah had neither the right nor the power, Mr. Heiskell, to give away such valuable concessions," said she.

"Mr. Heiskell has staked everything that he has on this work," said Jo slowly, her voice sinking despairingly, "and he has suffered loss at the hands of sneaking, cowardly people who tried even murder to stop him. Mr. Heiskell shan't be thrown aside like this, mother; he must be compensated."

"He'll be paid for the work of drillin' that he's done," Mrs. Ryland nodded, "and no mo'. Let him present his bill to my lowyah, Mr. Evans. My lowyah will settle with Mr. Heiskell at the regular rate for such services."

"I must see the court record of your appointment as administratrix of this estate first, madam," said Ared, his throat dry, his eyes burning.

"You'll find it all straight and of record, just as she's told you, son," said Fleming. "I'm not a man to run in a bluff on a thing like this. Go ahead, look

at the record, and then come up here and pack this truck of yours off of my land. I'll give you two days to git the last of it away."

Fleming turned away, and strode down the gully to view the pool of collected oil. Sandford tagged after him, hands in the pockets of his great ulster, and Jo stretched out her hand in impulsive appeal to Ared.

"Mr. Heiskell, I'm ashamed, for my mother, for my name, to look you in the face!" she said.

"Dotah!" reproved Mrs. Ryland, sharply.

"But I beg you, I beg you, Mr. Heiskell, to believe that I knew nothing about this ahead of you—I beg you to believe me!"

"I do believe you, Pardner," said he, sincerely, although his heart felt as hollow as a drum.

Ared knew that there was no bluff in this move of Fleming's. Mrs. Ryland had been the weak spot in their defences which they had not watched. He had not considered her as a factor, believing, from Jo's assumption of authority, that everything rested in her hands solely. He was of the opinion, indeed, that Ryland had willed the estate to his daughter, or had at least named her as administratrix. But it appeared now that he had died intestate, and Fleming had availed himself of this breach in the bulwark when he saw that Heiskell had saved the lease to the Rylands in spite of discouragements and delays.

Heiskell was not to share in that prosperity; Flem-

ing had sworn it. Now he was keeping his oath, although he had yielded on one point, that of surrender to the heirs of his old enemy, Ryland. The widow and daughter would profit through the repudiation of Jo's agreement with Heiskell, but to what extent Heiskell, of course, did not know. More than likely Fleming had fooled the shallow-headed old woman out of that half-million dollars' worth of property. Certainly, he had not given her anything near its true value.

After her earnest appeal to Ared for his confidence, Jo had turned her back on her traitorous mother and the victorious forces and started toward the house. She was dressed that day in the same brown corduroy riding habit that she wore when she sought him in answer to his advertisement and laid her "proposition" before him. Her russet hair was loosely looped beneath her knocked and weathered hat, and her tall laced boots set trim and snug about her shapely feet. She was as handsome, wholesome and clean-eyed a lass as one might overtake in a long day's ride.

She bent her head as she left them, as if to hide tears which she was too proud to let them add to their mean triumph. Ared looked after her, not beyond nor abstractedly above her, feeling her perfections of body and soul that moment as he never had rightly appraised them before. The sternness of his face softened, and a feeling of something more gentle than pity moved his heart. He turned

to Mrs. Ryland, who was adjusting her faded hair above her ear.

"Madam, I don't know the price of your betrayal," said he, his voice solemn and deep, "but whatever it may be, you have lost this day far more than you have gained."

His look went again to Jo, toiling up the hill dejectedly, as if the light had gone out of her heart and the strength from her young limbs. Mrs. Ryland turned her big eyes after her daughter, and gathered her skirts up as if she meant to follow.

"Sheep-herdin' was your business, I am told," said she, in high disdain, "before you attempted to enter the lists of finance. You'd better go back to sheep-herdin' again."

Ared bowed, with a solemn deference to her age and sex. It was an act of spontaneous courtesy, and it nettled the old woman, as a crude mind always is provoked by unruffled politeness, more than any answer he might have framed.

"Stand out of my way, suh!" said she, although the field was open, and he was not within ten feet of her. He stepped back, in grave dignity, and bent his head. But his searching eyes were on her face as she passed him, and she knew that they pierced the pitiful vanities of her withered heart, and the judgment that she read in them made her shrunken cheeks burn.

Ared resumed his work of disconnecting the engine, doubly necessary now, and Fleming and his

nephew returned to their automobile after a little. Old Mrs. Ryland had gained the top of the hill, and stood near her door as they passed on their way back to town. She lifted her hand and flapped them a coquettish salute, to which neither of them replied. Their silent, grey car slipped past her, itself the symbol of the unfeeling power which it bore, neither of them turning toward her. They had played upon her vanity and shallow ambitions, winning their desire, and now they were not even villainously-gentlemanly enough to give her a parting look.

Triggerheel came along when the sun was reddening in the west, and the wind had begun to set long fangs of ice on the edges of the puddles which the day's thaw had filled. There was a canvas thrown over something in the wagon, and Jo's horse trotted along beside the team.

"Well, Ed, he wouldn't take it back," said the old man, as he drew up near the boiler house, where Ared was piling the pipe.

"Not even at a reduced price?" asked Ared.

"Not even at a fourth off of what I paid him for it," said Triggerheel. "I wouldn't come down any more than that, dang 'im, I'll keep it and haul it around till I *do* need it, or git a chanct to sell it to some feller that's lost his wife, maybe, or somethin' like that. Anything turned up while I was away?"

"Yes, everything's up," said Ared.

He related then, in a few words, what had occurred, and the old man listened with a stunned look in his eyes. When Ared had told it all, Triggerheel wound the lines around the brake, slowly, with mechanical motion, and got out of the wagon. He lifted the canvas from the big pine box that contained the coffin which the undertaker would not take back, and unloaded it without a word.

"Well, I'd hold her for a dollar a foot on that drillin', and I'd make her pay for the casin', too," said he at last, turning to Ared, who had followed him, as if that offered a substantial consolation for their loss.

"That's about the way I'd figured it up myself," agreed Ared.

"With the money you git out of that you can make a new start," said Triggerheel, with brisk hopefulness, hurrying around unhitching the team. "We can go over to the Jerusalem field, up nearer Kansas, and maybe you can git in on a lease like we thought we'd got in on this."

"I've been thinking that way, too," said Ared, the edge of his disappointment taken off a bit by the old man's cheerfulness.

"But I don't hold nothin' agin Pardner, she was straight with us," said Triggerheel.

"She's heart-broken over her mother's deceit," Ared told him.

"I knowed she would be," nodded the old man, "and nobody around to even hold her by the hand."

"It's plain enough how they gained the old woman over," said Ared, lending a hand with the team. "That fellow Sandford even made a proposal of marriage to Pardner through her mother, and I suppose he'd have been glad enough to take her with the lease in case he'd failed to get it without her. But the old woman thinks he's several shades whiter and finer in the grain than people like you and me, and I believe in my soul, Triggerheel, that the little brindle pup just hung himself up for a bait to the old woman."

"Yes, that old woman orto be sewed up in a sack and chucked in the river," Triggerheel declared. "But Pardner she wouldn't have a feller built so close to the ground as Harvard-Yale."

"No, she wouldn't," said Ared, heartily. "And then Uncle Fleming steps in and runs his bluff on the old woman. He asks her what good a well is without a market for the oil, and tells her nobody ever will buy the lease from us under such conditions. He points out to the vain old featherless hen that she must live on here in the tantalising situation of having wealth without being able to realise on it. He finds out, at the last minute, that Ryland died without a will, and he shoots little nephew up here to carry her in and have her appointed to administer the estate. That gives her power over it for a year, pending the settlement of all outstanding claims against the dead man, and even Pardner can't step in and touch a cent."

"That old woman was down on me and you from the first day, Ed," said Triggerheel, looking at the young man sharply.

"Yes, she wanted me to send you away," admitted Ared.

"Well, you didn't," said the old man, proudly, "and I wouldn't give a whoop for this loss we've stood, Ed, if I had the load off of my mind about Purty. Take the two together, they bend m' sperrit down. I'll never git the sound of that old feller's dyin' breath out of m' years, Ed, never to my last hour."

"I can't see where you've got any room to lay up regret for that shot," said Ared, "for if you hadn't got him he would 'a' got you."

"Well, I want to take a look and a search around to-night," said Triggerheel, "and see if I can find out where they took him to. I want to put him away decent if I can. I put twenty-seven dollars into that coffin, and I bought him a shroud so he wouldn't have to back into heaven, if he ever got there, as the man from Indianny said."

Ared set about the preparation of supper, always a simple task, and this evening simpler for the reason that habit, rather than the clamour of appetite, prompted the observance. It seemed to him, for all the little cheer which Triggerheel's hopefulness had shot for a moment through his gloom, that the bottom had come out of his whole structure. It was such a big disappointment, and the force of the fall

so stunning, that he felt as night settled over him the fatuity of beginning to build again. Depression hovered above him like a miasmatic cloud.

Here he had wrought, in high hope, for others to enjoy, tricked in a manner, and deceived like one who takes the world at its word. He should have had it in binding form, a contract signed and sealed, then there would have been no disposing of the leasehold without his consent. But it was done, and the little omission had allowed a fortune to slip out of his hands. He had but himself to blame, all considered, for all philosophy seeks to impress us with, all history stands to remind us of, the instability of the human word.

In his heart he believed Jo Ryland clear of the subterfuge which had wrested the fruit of his labour from his hands. Deceit did not live in eyes like hers, simulation could not charge words with such feeling as her denunciation of her mother carried, or trembled in her tones when she implored him to believe her true.

That feeling of tender concern for Jo, such as had softened him when he witnessed her dejection as she left them that morning, swept him again in a warm flood, but he closed the door of his heart harshly against it, as if it were an unwelcome guest. What place had he for a tender sentiment toward any woman, save that one to whom he had been so visionarily loyal all those weeks? He despised himself for the momentary defection, humbling him-

self like a priest before an altar in the sudden up-leaping of the white light of his soul.

Again he heard her voice, closing his eyes in blissful recollection, and once more he felt the quick, soft pressure of her warm lips upon his forehead. The world emptied itself of all other women in that exalted moment; there was no room for any in it save the lady of his dream.

He put his hand to his forehead, reverently, the shadow of his face broken by the glimmer of a smile. There was a man's vow framing in his heart again, a man's purpose shaping to his eager hand. He got up, the fragments of his meal on the rough board, expanding with his new desire to lay hold upon the tangle of the thing men call success and unravel it for her sake.

To-morrow would see the beginning of a new campaign. What had he to do with discouragement or failure while he had her in the world to strive up to, and win his place beside, and warm her one day against his heart!

Triggerheel came back from his quest early. He had been over to Sandford's camp, and had talked with several men there, but they were either deeply subtle or openly innocent, he could not determine which. At any rate, he got no word of the body which had disappeared from his tent, and there was nothing of a suspicious nature around their camp, he said. The old man was very much depressed.

"That box'll stand before m' eyes every time I

go in m' tent, to tell me that I sent that pore old feller out of this world," he lamented. "It'll stand there and accuse me, and lay the charge of unfriendliness agin me on account of that misguided boy. Ed, I'd give my deed to my lot in the Eternal City if I could swipe out what I done last night!"

The old man was undergoing a sharp flagellation of remorse. His thin face was strained, his eyes were red as if from secret weeping. Ared respected his loyalty, but could not justify his sorrow.

"In the morning," said he, thinking to break the dismal train of the old man's thought, "I'm going in to collect from Mrs. Ryland's lawyer for this job, and then we'll have a settlement."

"That's all right, Ed, I ain't worried about that, I'm not down to the bottom of the old sock yit."

"I'll go on over and see my father while I'm about it, and knock the new props out from under his calculations again," said Ared. "It will hit him harder than it did us to know that our big venture has turned out so badly, I'm afraid."

"Yes, I reckon it will," Triggerheel agreed. "Well, if it wasn't for thinkin' what I done to that pore, misled boy my mind 'd be as light as a cottonwood seed."

He was bound to brood over it, and go back to it, Ared saw, and left him to have his fill of mourning for the scoundrel who had abused his friendship at every turn.

"If I'd 'a' knowed it was Purty," said he from the

door, "I'd 'a' run in on him and took his gun away from him. But I didn't reckon they could hire him to do a thing like that."

While Ared held no doubt in the matter at all, he kept his opinions to himself, and Triggerheel went along to his tent. But he was back again in a little while on the run. Ared heard him coming, and opened the door.

The old man's face was white in the light of the lantern which Ared held aloft, and his breath was quick. For a moment he seemed unable to get control of his tongue, and then he blurted:

"Did you take it away from there, Ed—did you move it?"

"What—did I move what?" asked Ared, shaking the old man by the shoulder, almost as greatly excited as he.

"The coffin," said Triggerheel.

"No, I didn't touch it, I haven't been outside since I left you with the team."

"Well, it's gone," said Triggerheel. "Dang my melt if this ain't goin' a lee-tle too fur! Them dang fellers they've come over and stold it, too!"

A thorough search of the premises seemed to confirm Triggerheel's suspicion. The coffin was gone.

"That shows what sort of an opinion those brigands have of me!" said Ared, disgusted with himself.

"Well, I didn't need it, nohow," said Triggerheel, plainly relieved, now that he had taken time to consider it, that the thing was stolen. "They

must 'a' wanted it to bury Purty in, and that's what I got it for."

"It seems to indicate that they have a remote feeling of decency left in them, anyhow," said Ared, relieved to see that the old man was taking it like a philosopher.

"Yes, but for out-and-out thievin', where're you goin' to find a outfit to beat 'em?" Triggerheel wanted to know. "They've skinned us at every jump, and I never was unlucky that a-way in my life before."

It was an unfortunate remark for Ared's peace, and his high resolutions, framed but a little while before. He returned to the boiler shed wondering if there was anything in luck, and whether the shadow of the Heiskell house had stretched out after him to this new undertaking. His father believed himself to be unlucky. Ared recalled how he had hastened away from there, uneasy in his mind, the moment that he had learned the terms upon which his son was sinking the well.

Perhaps there was something in Fleming's declaration that the Heiskells were unlucky men. It was a cold thought to take to bed with him, and a cheerless thing to lie with and try to lose in sleep.

CHAPTER XV

"HEISKELL, YOU'RE A SPORT!"

MORNING brought with it the tonic of reassurance, as morning will charge with new vigour even an expiring hope.

Triggerheel was already at work removing their belongings to the public road, where he was to establish camp and keep watch over the machinery until Ared could either strike a new contract or make arrangements for shipping to a new field of industry.

Ared went out to the road, where Triggerheel had drawn the boiler, on his way to the Ryland house after the order on the old lady's lawyer for a settlement. He noted a new cheerfulness in his faithful comrade's face, and was glad that he had emerged from the shadow of Purty's tragic end so soon.

"Well, it's all right, Ed—everything's all right," said he, as Ared came up.

"You mean about Purty?"

"Yes, about him. Feller was over here a minute ago and told me they put him away snug and decent in the coffin and shroud. I don't know who he was, but he p'inted the grave out to me—you can see it down there by the branch, side of them willers. The

feller said 'friends' of that pore, misled boy put him away, and they wanted me to know about it so I'd feel easy."

"They are a very kind and considerate pack of scoundrels," said Ared.

"Yes, they're purty mean," nodded Triggerheel; "they ain't a man among 'em that ain't got a bent-in conscience, I'll bet you. Well, just so they buried Purty——"

The old man dismissed the matter with a wave of the hand, and went ahead with his work.

Ared went to Mrs. Ryland's door, where he waited while she wrote the promised order on her lawyer for the amount due Heiskell for sinking the well. Jo was not in sight, and Mrs. Ryland offered no excuse for her absence during their brief interview.

There was considerable delay in coming to a settlement with the lawyer, who questioned each item and challenged the aggregate as being excessive. His behaviour appeared to Ared that of a man who knew himself to be a useless attaché, and who laid himself out in trivialities to impress his employer with a sense of his indispensability. He paid the account at last, and Ared left his office with fourteen hundred dollars in his pocket.

Two hundred of that amount, he computed, belonged to Triggerheel for his services and money advanced. In the remainder there was no profit, after the cost of the destroyed boiler and the casing

used in the well was deducted. It paid him wages, and that was all, but even at that he felt that it was better than that much time wasted. The experience was costly, but it was invaluable.

Ared dreaded the disclosure which he must make to his father, not so much because it seemed a confession of failure and inadequacy on his own account as for the sad disappointment it must carry to the old man's heart. Solomon's hope of staving off the deluded investors in his own venture by means of his son's prospects must now come to a sudden end.

There was smoke in the chimney as Ared approached the old place. Solomon had the house in order, and his long hair combed out smooth, the bow of his necktie arranged with all his old-time nicety. He had been reading his old books by the window of the neat, cozy room; one of them lay face downward on the chair from which he had risen to open the door to his son.

Ared lost no time in coming to the disagreeable tidings. His father received the news in silence, his head bowed upon his hand. When Ared had finished, the old man looked up with a smile.

"It is not defeat, son," said he comfortingly; "you cannot rightly call it that. You struck out like a man—you tried. That's a victory in itself."

Perhaps Solomon would not have received the news so calmly before the wrecking of his own venture. That proof of his fallibility appeared to have softened him and rectified his judgment. On hearing

his father's words, Ared felt that he could now toss away the last regret for the miscarried calculations, charge it all to the account of experience, and begin anew with a stouter heart than before.

"I'm glad to see you take the news so calmly," said Ared. "I was afraid you might feel that I had failed."

"Success at one trial wouldn't be worth anything to a man," said Solomon. "It would only pamper his vanity and make him insufferable. No, a man must climb and fall, climb and fall, and creep to the goal at last on bloody knees to make the victory sweet. I know it now. I'll never reach it; I'm too far along for that; but you will, son; you've made a start."

"I'm looking around for another handhold," said Ared, lifted beyond the clouds of his unfortunate day by his father's serenity, "and I will undertake to come to a basis of settlement with the creditors of your company. In a little while, I hope, I shall have something more tangible than a promise to offer them as security, and in time I'll discharge every dollar of your obligation to them."

"It's a melancholy legacy that I'll leave to you, my lad, and I have only my own impetuosity to blame for it. But I know you'll clear the name of any stain my muddle has put on it. Still, it's a monstrous load—twenty-five thousand dollars!"

Solomon sighed as he named it, and shook his greying locks.

"Not so much to me to-day as it was sixty days ago, neither so hopeless of winning, nor so far away," said Ared. "Why, I've got the twenty-fifth part of it in my pocket now."

"Yes; you'll turn it, and see it mount," nodded Solomon.

"I'm going to stick to the exploration—it's bound to lead to something in the end; this close rub I've had with success shows me that. There are others who have lands and leases and lack the money for development. I can find them, and get better terms even than I thought I had on the Ryland lease," said Ared.

"I wouldn't urge you to put your money in it, but my faith in the old place is as strong—nay, stronger—than ever before," said Solomon.

"It's more than likely here," said Ared, "but it's a question of depth. Perhaps it's beyond all reach."

He spoke without either interest or enthusiasm, as one commenting out of duty on a tiresome theme.

"Time will put the harvest of my hope into somebody's hands, and I would to God that it might be yours," said the old man, fervently.

"I haven't enough capital to put down a deep well, and it will take a deep well to strike it here, deeper than anything that's ever been sunk in the South," said Ared. He veiled his inmost belief that no well, however deep, would come to oil on that melancholy spot.

"Perhaps," said Solomon. "If I could lay hands

on that villain that absconded with my funds, I could demonstrate to the world that there's a thousand-fold security for every dollar the public put into the company lying beneath these hills. But it's a useless speculation, the rascal's gone, gone."

"Is there anything new in the situation at all?" Ared inquired.

"Nothing, except some letters from stockholders which have followed me here, and two or three addressed to this place directly. They know where I am, and all of them are asking for information, some of them for the return of their money. It breaks my heart to read them, for loss comes with such distraction to the poor."

"Well, there's nothing for it but to remain here and face such of them as come, and assure them, if you can, that I have assumed the obligation. I would suggest that you have a circular printed setting forth these facts, telling them all exactly how this thief Drumm robbed both them and you, and asking them to be patient and forbearing for six months. At the end of that time I will engage to return to every stockholder twenty-five per cent. of his investment, with interest on the whole."

Solomon Heiskell was so thoroughly chastened by his troubles that tears welled in his eyes on hearing this generous assurance from his son. In their ingenuous hearts they saw only the bigness of the intention. The honesty of Ared's purpose was so entire that the inadequacy of the security in the eyes

of clamouring creditors did not appear in the least ridiculous to them.

"I'll prepare the letter this morning, and carry it in to the printer this afternoon," said Solomon, getting out paper and pen.

"While you're about it, I'll take a look around the old place," said Ared, with a feeling that he had been away from it a long while, and that many changes must have taken place meantime in those immobile hills.

Solomon Heiskell looked with admiration upon the strength of his son as he stood a moment there inside the door. His rough clothing covered loosely his sinewy limbs, his long hair swept over his deep forehead as it did in his careless days of shepherding, but his face was set with the seal of a purpose which Solomon had not marked in it in the old times. He seemed even more gaunt, and beaten down to the bone, than before. The ridges of his cheek-bones were marked, and hollows fell beneath them, in the way that nature pares down those predestined to suffer for the world, and bear its burdens in the heat of the day.

Ared left his father to the composition of the letter to the investors in the Prophet's Well Company and sought the little sheltered bench in the hillside where his mother lay between two straight young cedars, in her little house whose door was closed to this world's tempests for evermore.

One had been there before him and removed the

fallen grasses and blowing leaves. He stood a little while, the wind in his uncovered hair, then struck out across the hills, which were as dear to him in all their bleakness as the grey deserts to the wandering seed of Ishmael.

Hunger faced him back toward the house after he had been walking and dreaming two hours or more. It was then long past midday, and the soft, warm mists were setting in again on the wind from the far southern gulf.

There was a grey motor car, which had a familiar look, drawn up in the road before the bars, a wrapped, huddled figure at the wheel. Voices came from the house. Feeling again that cold foreboding which had stolen over him the day before when Fleming came into view, Ared drew near the door.

His heart leaped then, as he stopped to listen, for there was but one voice in the world that could thrill it so. A thousand fantasies came trooping into his mind to account for her presence there, Jane Sloane, the singer who lifted her eyes to heaven as she sang. Had she come seeking him, drawn by the far-reaching call of his strong love, had she come with his reward before his time?

Then another voice sounded, dispersing his illusions, the voice of Horace Fleming, throaty, dictatorial, coarse. Resentment surged over Ared as he paused, listening. How was it that this man should come constantly between him and the sunshine of life? Not so long ago she had fled to his

protection in terror of Fleming, and to-day she was there under his patronage, as witnessed by his words.

"I just throw you this suggestion as a solution of the difficulty, and as a friend of Miss Sloane here," Fleming was saying, "and if you're wise, Heiskell, you'll think it over."

"I would drain the blood from my heart if that would satisfy you, my dear lady," returned Solomon, in the voice of one harried and desperate, "but I could not pay you back the money if my life were forfeit, for I have no money to pay."

"I am the heaviest investor, the worst deluded victim of the swindle," said Jane Sloane, her voice sweet even in denunciation and arraignment, "and I think you owe it to me, considering the way you and that man Drumm took advantage of my confidence, to do *something*."

"If you will have patience, miss, and wait till my son returns," said Solomon, "he may be able to impress you with the sincerity of his undertaking, in which I seem to have failed. But I implore you to believe me, Miss Sloane, and madam, that I was sincere in my representations to you."

"But you must have known that you published false statements," said the voice of Jane Sloane.

"You assured us that there was oil here," said another feminine voice, smooth and deep, like Jane's, but older. "Where is it, where are all the activities which your misleading advertisement in the papers described?"

"'Engines going day and night'," said Fleming, quoting a persistent statement of the advertisements.

"I was deceived by my colleague in that particular of the work as completely as any of the rest," said Solomon, in voice of contrition and abasement which made his son's heart ache to hear. "I have told you that before. Drumm was as shrewd as he was dishonest, and he could not have cast even an honest shadow! But the oil is here, madam; it underlies all this land, and future explorations will set me right on that particular, at least."

"I don't see how that's going to give me back my money, though," said Jane, with a sigh.

"You're wrong, Heiskell," declared Fleming, in authoritative voice; "there's no oil under these hills. You're clear out of the range of it, and the little bit that comes through on the spring down there is just a seep from above. Do you suppose I wouldn't 'a' had my hands on this land long ago if I'd seen anything to it?"

"Time will tell," said Solomon.

"But this fiddlin' around won't give back Miss Sloane's seven thousand dollars," said Fleming with new briskness. "Come across with the money now, Heiskell, and save yourself a big, sudden bunch of trouble."

"Sir"—began Solomon, his indignation almost choking him.

"You have robbed me, doubly robbed me!" said Jane, in stern reproof, her voice low. "Not only

my money is gone, Mr. Heiskell, but you have taken away from me the dearest ambition of my life. I never can realise on it now—my money is gone."

Ared put out his hand to open the door, but checked it, the act unfinished, as Jane's mother spoke.

"Her father laboured for years, Mr. Heiskell, to build up that little fortune for her," she said, "to enable her to go abroad to the great masters and complete her musical education and fit her for her career. Now he is gone, and the work of the latter years of his life is swept away, and I am not able to carry out his designs."

"Gold help me!" said old Solomon, piteously.

Ared debated now whether he should go in, or turn again to the hills and tarry until they departed. He felt that it would be kinder to the dream which he had held in his heart to go away and leave her unseen; felt that he could thus hold it as he had made it, and let it fade away and come to nothing after a while, like a fragile flower. But what discord would enter if he should see her there in friendly league with the man whom she had made believe to shudder at and shun, browbeating and accusing that innocent, gentle old man! He was even moving away, softly, when Fleming spoke again.

"Oh, cut it out, Heiskell!" said he gruffly. "You can take care of the little fellers all right if you get Miss Sloane's claim out of the way. Maybe you can even put through that bluff framed up by your son for takin' care of them—I don't know."

"If I had the money to pay Miss Sloane, or any security to give her, do you think I would hesitate one moment?" asked the old man. "This little piece of land represents my entire assets, and all my creditors must share in that. I cannot favour one above another; if you are asking me to do that, you are asking the impossible."

"But we—Miss Sloane don't want your land, she wants money," said Fleming.

There was the noise of him rising to his feet and striding across the room. When he spoke again, his voice sounded from another direction, and Ared pictured him standing before the table at which he knew his father sat.

"Where's the whack you got out of it along with your fiscal agent?" demanded Fleming.

"Sir, do you mean——"

Fleming broke the old man off impatiently.

"I mean the money you carried with you when you skipped from Kansas City," said he. "Everybody knows how they split on a deal like that, and I know you've got a grip full of that money around here somewhere!"

"Fleming, you lie!" said Ared, opening the door.

Fleming started, with a quick motion of defence, wheeling from the table, over which he had leaned. Whatever it was that he had in mind, he caught himself immediately, and held his balance.

"I told you one time that I let a man call me a liar *once*, Heiskell," he said, calmly.

"Count this one, then, and I'll come to your office to-morrow morning and repeat it," said Ared, meeting Fleming's threatening eyes with steady challenge, one foot on the threshold.

Old Solomon Heiskell, sitting at the table, with its orderly stacks of books on either end, paper, pens, and ink before him, sighed as if he had been relieved of a crushing weight.

Jane Sloane was sitting with her back to the door. She started at the sound of Ared's voice, turned slightly in his direction, then leaned toward her mother, as if to seek her protection from the storm which seemed threatening in the room. There was no light of recognition in her handsome face. Her mother lifted her slow, heavy eyes—there was a sombre cloud of veil banked across her forehead, pushed up so from her face—and looked at the young man inquiringly.

Ared entered the room and placed his hat on the table, taking his stand near his father. Old Solomon had risen.

"Mrs. Sloane and daughter, this is my son," said he.

"He comes in like a March wind," said Fleming, walking back to his chair, "but he wouldn't blow out a candle. He's harmless—he won't hurt you."

The two women looked at Ared curiously, the younger one with shy timidity, quickly withdrawing her eyes. He appeared anything but a financier to inspire hope and confidence in the breasts of scep-

tical creditors, in his bagged corduroys, smeared over with the stains of crude oil and the earthy pigments from the well that he had won and lost. But there was strength and decision in his rugged figure as he stood, tall and severe, before them.

Fleming sat down again, a sneer in his eyes, his hair combed over his forehead like a sheriff's, and hooked his arm uncouthly over the post of his chair. Father and son continued standing at the table, in the attitude of judges rather than the judged.

"Miss Sloane is the heaviest stockholder in my company," the old man began to explain, turning to his son.

"I have been listening outside the door," confessed Ared, without apology or embarrassment, "debating with myself whether I belonged in this conference or not. I heard enough—I understand."

"Well, where's my daughter's money coming from?" demanded Mrs. Sloane, with a certain tinge of scorn which her evident good breeding could not cover in her tones.

Ared could not trust his eyes to seek the younger woman's face. He had not looked at her, save as one component of the picture before him, since taking his place at his father's side, for he did not want it to appear that he appealed for the recognition which she doubtless had her own reasons for denying.

"Madam, I have undertaken the task of restitution," said he. "It may be slow—it is almost cer-

tain to be slow—but I will repay dollar for dollar. I cannot tell you this hour how I shall do it. All I know is that it shall be done."

Fleming's throaty chuckle rose at that, so nearly a laugh that he had to give it vent at the corners of his flat mouth. His facial expression did not change save for that, although the reflection of mirth was in his eyes. But no number of words at his command could have carried the derision which his chuckle expressed.

"You mean that you expect her to wait for years and years!" said Mrs. Sloane.

"No, I am going to begin repaying her to-day," said Ared, drawing out his wallet from his inner pocket.

He counted out the two hundred dollars due Triggerheel, and placed the remainder of the money on the table.

"There is twelve hundred dollars on account," said he. "This belongs to another man; I am not reserving it for myself."

Ared's voice was in his throat, and his hands were unsteady, it seemed, for one so sinewy and strong. Old Solomon looked at him, his face drawn with pain; protest, appeal, speaking from his sad old eyes. But Ared did not see him. His head was bent as he reached out and pushed the money a little nearer Jane Sloane's hand, resting in its neat glove on the table's edge.

She moved away from it with a start, as if con-

scious only then of his act, or as if to escape contact with some dangerous thing plunged toward her suddenly. Jane rose, tall, straight, impressive in her rare beauty, her face paler than he remembered it, and a little sharper in that look of wistfulness which had drawn his heart out of his bosom when she sang. Her dark hair swept from her temple, and lay against her cheek. There were tears in her great, soft eyes as she lifted them to his own.

Ared reached out his hand with quick impulse, as if appealing to her memory, longing to gather her to his bosom and console her, and lay the rare treasure of his love in the place of that lost ambition. For a moment her hand groped at her throat, as if gathering the edges of a mantle, but her eyes gave him no message of recognition. She turned from him, the money neglected near his hand. Mrs. Sloane reached over and gathered it up eagerly.

They were all standing now, Jane with her back turned to the table, her mother stowing the money away in her bag with hasty hand, as if doubtful of its reality, or distrustful of the transaction.

"It will help a little," said she, freeing a sigh of relief as she snapped the hasp of her bag.

Fleming came forward, a twinkling of something near to admiration in his eyes. He knew the history of every dollar of that money, how hard it had come into young Heiskell's hand, and what a havoc of hopes and intentions it must have left behind it in his heart.

"Heiskell," said he, speaking briskly to cover what there might be of sentiment or softness in his heart maybe, "no matter what they say about you, you're a sport!"

With that he stamped unceremoniously to the door.

Jane was the last to pass the door, which Fleming had left standing open. She turned her head when she reached the threshold in time to see old Solomon lay his hand on his son's shoulder and hear him moan, out of his stricken heart:

"Oh, lad—lad!"

CHAPTER XVI

PARDNER

SOLOMON was inconsolable. He charged himself with having pulled his son's fortunes down along with his own.

"How are you to proceed with your undertakings now, with your capital thrown into this great hole?" said he.

"I'll have to get along without capital for a little while, I guess," said Ared, with a smile. "Don't worry over that."

"It was a sacrifice that you shouldn't have made, that she should not have demanded," said Solomon, shaking his head sadly.

"She didn't demand it," said Ared, "and I would gladly make a greater sacrifice for her—everything but honour."

The old man looked at him with puzzled face. Ared was gazing in self-concentration out of the window which looked down to the deserted sheep-fold.

"Aye, she hath dove's eyes," sighed the old man, "but the heart of an eagle, I fear."

"No, I think not," denied Ared, dreamily.

"You speak almost as if you had known her," the old man said.

"No; how could I have known her?" said Ared. He felt the flush of betrayal on his face, and changed his position to hide it.

"What are your immediate plans, lad?" inquired the old man, almost tenderly.

"I'll put an advertisement in the paper to-morrow," Ared told him, "and then go on over to pay off my helper. Just now I think I'll take the kinks out of my back by chopping up a supply of wood for you."

Solomon smiled, as if his son's hopefulness found reflection in his own heart, but as Ared closed the door after him, and the sound of his lusty blows came from the woodrick, the old man shook his head despairingly. He began pacing the length of the room, with slow tread, hands clasped behind his back, chin upon his breast. Now and then he stopped before bookcase or mantel and looked at some object steadily, and now and then put out his hand to touch some article, or set some little thing to rights.

There was a brooding cloud upon him, he seemed to have grown very old. His shoulders fell forward, his face was grey. Presently he opened the door of his son's room and stood with his hand upon the latch, a tender smile moving his lips. Then he crossed and opened the other door into the room that he had shared with his true wife through many

a year of struggle. There were tears on his cheeks when he turned back to his slow pacing from the window to fireplace, fireplace to door.

Ared came in presently, with a cheerful bustle, and began preparing supper. But his air of brightness did not deceive the old man, who saw that it was assumed for his sake alone. He did not know what was in his son's heart, indeed, but he felt that his own was broken. That day he had been called a rascal and a thief.

"I don't seem to be able to think under a roof any more," said Ared, after supper. "I'm going to take a little turn up and down between here and the bars. If you want me, put your head out."

"I have felt that way, too, in past days," said Solomon, wagging his head, "when I had something in mind that I believed was going to bulge the world. But what have my life's big intentions come to at last! Well, you'll do better, you have not built on a dream."

"All of us build so, to a great extent," said Ared. He lit his pipe from a splinter at the hearth fire, and closed the door softly after him when he went out, as if fearful that he might startle away the last poor dream that the broken old man warmed in his disappointed heart.

Solomon sat before the fire, turning the ashes of his dead visions, a groan issuing now and then from his lips. All was down, wreckage was everywhere. The end of his life was a cluttered road, blocked

with fallen aspirations, foolish structures reared upon the unstable foundation of dreams.

Nobody believed in him; even Drumm, the rascal, had not believed in him. That young woman, with her soft, dark eyes, had not believed in him, and Fleming, who doubtless had judged him according to his own integrity, had called him a thief. He looked back over his life since the day that he gathered the oil from the little stream, and the fatal lure of its fumes struck into his blood. That had been the beginning of his folly, the preface to that insane struggle through which he had dragged his son, blighting no knowing what young ambitions which might have blossomed into healthy achievements.

He considered the miles of useless holes which their combined labour had driven in the hillside, and lived again in that poignant hour of remorse the years of obloquy in which they were cut off from the world by what men considered his dangerous peculiarity. At last the lad, Ared, had refused to go on with the fruitless toil, after the engine had broken down that memorable day. The boy had come to view it with the unwarped judgment of the world. He said there was no oil there, and he turned from the panting, heart-wearing struggle, to husband his sheep upon the hills.

Then there followed those years of festering desire, after his wife had gone, and at last the horizon grew red suddenly with the discovery of the great

pool of oil, just a little way beyond his acres, on the elevated prairie lands. Then the old desire had overwhelmed him again, and had ridden him like a sweat-drawing nightmare.

But men laughed at his belief that there was oil under his rocky hills. The quest for some one with faith had worn his heart to a shred, and the indifference of his son to the sudden riches which were falling daily into the hands of the unworthy had driven him to madness. There stood the blot of his attack upon, and extermination of, his son's flock, by which he had hoped to divorce him from that sluggish life and set his hand to nobler deeds. It had been the hot deed of an insane, unbalanced night, and the result had been this overwhelming disgrace at the end of his life.

The lad, in the generosity of his great heart, had covered the deed with silence; he had not spoken of it once. It had brought new and wider experience to the lad, but it had only unfolded promises to snatch them away with a snarl. The blight of his own unlucky star had followed the boy's undertakings, and success had been rived out of his hand. Ah, if he, if Solomon the unlucky, had but kept away from that well that day!

The colour had gone out of life for him; there were no more alluring prisms upon the mists of to-morrow. Nobody believed in him. Fleming had said there was no oil, and had given the strongest proof that his belief was sincere. Doubtless the big

company would have bought the land from him at the very beginning of the discoveries if, in the justification of past experience, there had been anything to indicate oil there.

He was done. The shuttle of hope was empty, and he was a worn and shredded husk. Nobody believed in him; at the last hour of that grey day, he did not believe in himself. No, there was no oil beneath his barren ground. It had been his curse to hold the dream of it in his heart so long, until it had absorbed his blood and his soul like an evil excrescence, and then had burst and disappeared.

Ared was casting up his accounts, also, as he tramped up and down in the yellow flare of the new-risen moon. The day's events had left him suspended without a plan for the future. For the want of capital, he must go to work at once somewhere in that district, this time for the mere pay of drilling, without hope of any larger reward. Not only his material plans called for revision, but also the aspirations of his heart.

Jane Sloane seemed removed from him now by a distance which he might never gain. In her eyes he stood as a party to the swindle which had gulped down her money in a day, and with it her future plans. He could understand readily how she was drawn to put her entire resources into the company. She had been in that country, and had seen that the rapid fortunes which Drumm promised were so common that the wonder of them ceased. She doubtless

had hoped to realise in a few weeks or months enough profit from her supposed investment to carry out her designs in comfort.

There was no doubt that she had recognised him; his act of partial restitution had almost surprised it from her in words. But the silence that she had kept seemed to tell him that the past was forgotten, that his place in it had become a blank. He was without the comfort now of looking forward to the day when they should meet; the future would be without the sustaining stimulation of that hope.

She had an eagle's heart, his father said, recalling in his bitterness her slow, sad words of accusation. Yet the tears which sprung in her eyes as she rose and looked into his face seemed to tell him of something gentler than that. But she had not spoken, she had not smiled. She had shut him out of her heart like a stranger.

Now he must begin again without the warm light of that exalted dream. But it was sweet to have had it, even to lose it, and brave to know that it had held him up, head to the storm, like a stout ship, when he might have faltered in adversity but for its great, white light. He had made his leap, and he had fallen short. Now he must begin again, back, farther back, than two months ago, when he left that place with the fresh blood of his slaughtered flock in his nostrils. And that without the hope of her.

He shook himself to fling off the sombre thought. She was one in a world of women, heartless, exact-

ing, unjust, no doubt. He would put her out of his life, and forget her great eyes softened with the mist of tears, and forget her voice in the tender cadence of that old song, which came to the heart with so much comfort, and unfolded such a long, sweet vista of homely reverie.

“Just a song at twilight,
When the lights are low,
And the flick’ring shadows
Softly come and go——”

But even as he resolved it came back to him, and would not be denied. Perhaps she was all that he had charged, but in the depths of his soul he loved her; perhaps she was not for him, doubtless her ambitions mounted far above him, but he must love her still.

“Why not?” said he to himself, throwing back his head, the moonlight on his strong, earnest face. And again, as if he challenged the answer, “Why not?”

Who was above him so high that he must despair of attaining an equal footing? Not any. He braced back his shoulders and filled his deep lungs with the soft, spring-like air, scented this night with the mingled perfumes which the mists of the morning had released from dry stem of bergamot, wild grape and sassafras. He was still master, he had been nobody’s man. The world was before him, as full of opportunity as before, for all of that one which had

been wrenched away from him in the moment of victory. There was a way open for him yet, and in the morning he would take it, and tumble aside the phantoms which the world rears to affright the poor in heart. Master, master, and not man!

There came a sudden dash of hoofs around the point of the hill, sheltered by dark timber, lean and bleak in the strong moonlight. Ared was near the bars in the rambling, vine-grown rail fence. He turned and walked back, wondering who it might be, for riders on that road were seldom by day, and most unusual at night.

A moment dissolved all question. The rider veered over to his side of the road, and drew up before him.

"Pardner!" said he.

"I thought, somehow, that you'd be out in this moonlight," said she, jumping to the ground as light as a bird, and giving her panting horse's neck a caressing pat.

"What's the news?" he asked, feeling that something important, which perhaps involved Triggerheel and his own possessions, had happened.

"I just came up to talk a minute—in case I found you," she replied. "Mother and I moved over to town this morning, and we're living high on the wages of betrayal at the Midland."

"You must not think of it that way, Jo," he replied gently. "Your mother acted wholly within her rights. She's a better business man than we are,

Jo; if we'd have been half as smart we'd have had a contract."

"I feel that both mother and myself are bound to divide with you the proceeds of the sale of the lease by just as strong an obligation as a contract in writing. We can't get away from that."

"I've been paid for the work of drilling the well, Jo. That lets you out of it, so don't trouble over it any more."

"You have a moral claim on a fourth of the fifty thousand dollars that she sold out for to——"

"Was *that* all she got?" said he.

"Fleming robbed her," sighed Jo, "but she believes she made a brilliant bargain. Well, I'll have my share of it at the end of a year, and then we'll have a settlement."

"We've had our settlement, Jo," he told her gravely, laying his hand on her shoulder. "I'll never split a penny of that little share of yours, so put that out of your head."

"We'll see," said she, nodding seriously. "You don't know how much mother has been to blame in this—why, they sneaked letters to her, and—I found one of them yesterday when I was helping her pack. I don't know when she got it, and there was only a line of typewriting on it: 'Advance on royalties,' it said. I think there was money in it."

"Perhaps," said he easily, not caring now.

"It was that fat little Sanford, undermining us all along," she said, with hot spitefulness.

"Yes, he even hired that poor fool to shoot at Triggerheel," he told her.

He told her then, for the first time, the story of Triggerheel's breaking Sandford in to ride. She enjoyed the recital, and had her laugh over it, but she became suddenly grave again, as if mirth had become a trespass in her moral code.

"There's been more trouble coming your way to-day, too," said she.

"You've heard about that?"

"Yes; the Kansas City papers which came this morning had a lot in them, and the *Star* this evening reprints all of it, along with a story of its own. Have you seen it?"

"No, I haven't been in town all day—since early morning."

"There's a lot about it," she sighed. "'The Big Swindle' the *Star* calls it, and an interview with that snippy chorus girl who used to sing at the Palace."

"What did she say?" he inquired, fearing that his voice betrayed him.

"Very little; Fleming did most of the talking," Jo replied.

With her answer something accusing flashed up within him against Jane Sloane, something that he had overlooked in his readjustment of a little while before. How did she come to be on such a sudden and friendly footing with Fleming, the man whom she had professed to fear so greatly that night that he sent her away home to her people? What was

there in her tears when she could turn about so lightly? Perhaps they came from a shallow fount, easily drawn, lightly prized. Fleming——

"Yes, he was here with them," said he, remembering that Jo might be waiting for him to speak.

"I saw him dashing around with them in that old tugboat of his," she said, "and that flashy chorus girl was the centre of attraction in the dining room at the hotel this evening."

"She isn't a flashy chorus girl, Jo," he corrected gently, yet with an unusual earnestness which drew from her a sharp and curious glance; "she's a very well-connected and highly respectable young woman. Did you ever hear her sing?"

"I don't go to the Palace!" said Jo in high dignity.

"No, of course not," said he hastily. "I forgot that it was the Palace. You know it isn't so much the place, Jo, as the singer and her song."

Jo put her hand on his arm very gently, and looked him earnestly in the face.

"Ared, is she the *one*?" she asked.

"She's a very good singer—a remarkable singer, I believe, Jo," said he, dodging her question lamely.

"I knew there was somebody," said Jo, reproachfully sad, "but I didn't know who." She swallowed at something, then lifted her face bravely in the moonlight. "Tell me about her," said she.

"There's no use trying to hide things from you, Jo," he owned, with what seemed warm gratefulness for her penetration. Perhaps it eased his heart to

share the secret with another. That is the way of love, which denies when taunted, then writes a sonnet, confessing to the world.

"Tell me about her, Ared," she pressed.

"I have put her out of my heart, little Pardner, and shut the door," said he.

"And nobody else ever will open it; it's that kind of a door," said Jo, shaking her wise head sadly.

"If I knew that she was worthy——"

"She is—worthy of more than I could give. She put seven thousand dollars that her father left her into that scheme, Jo. It was to finish fitting her for her operatic ambitions, and he scraped and saved for years on it, they say."

"I'm sorry for her, then," said Jo. "Fleming is making a big talk in the paper about prosecution, and putting an end to wildcatters, and all that kind of stuff. Is there any ground for prosecution, Ared?"

"Unless I can come to some agreement with the stockholders, I'm afraid there is, Jo," he admitted.

"The *Star* says she's the heaviest stockholder of them all," said she.

"That's true, my father tells me."

"Well, it wouldn't give her back her money to send your father to prison, as Fleming threatens," said she.

"Far from it. I have assumed his obligations, but the difficult part of it will be to assure the stockholders with the security of a promise," said he.

"The paper says they sold over a hundred thou-

sand dollars' worth of stock!" said Jo, amazed at the ease with which he shouldered the load.

"Only a quarter of that," he corrected, "and I am undertaking to pay a fourth of that back to them at the end of six months."

"A fourth of twenty-five thousand dollars," said she musingly. "Well, there's twice that amount coming to you from the sale of the lease."

"You must not think about that, Jo," he chided. "I'm out of that entirely."

"That Sloane woman could help you so much if she knew you as well as I do, if she had the confidence in you that I have, Ared," said Jo. "Her assurance would quiet the other stockholders and hold them back on the—the—prosecution, if she knew you, Ared, as well as I do. But she doesn't—she never can."

"No, we are strangers; we never have worked and hoped together like you and I."

"And I only led you up to disappointment," said Jo sorrowfully, "but it may be as much——"

She left it unfinished, and turned abruptly to her horse.

Ared did not know that Jo was appealing for admission to the place from which he said he had dispossessed Jane Sloane. Anybody else would have seen it; Triggerheel had seen it, and his obduracy told her that his words had been hollow. The singer still filled his heart; there was no place for her.

"I'm going over to see how Triggerheel is making

it in the morning," he said, "and I think I'll go into camp there with the machinery until I can get another contract."

Jo thrust her foot into the stirrup, and swung to the saddle quickly.

"And to-morrow I'm going away," said she.

He was amazed. He looked at her blankly for an explanation, but Jo drew up the reins and settled in the saddle, her eyes on the lights of Oil City, blinking under the hill.

"Why, you didn't say anything about it when you came, Jo!" he protested, as if she had taken an unfair advantage.

"I didn't know it when I came," she answered.

She leaned toward him suddenly, and pushed back his hat from his forehead with something like the quick impulse of that other one when she had undone him with her kiss. But Jo did not go so far as that. She left her warm little hand there a moment, as if in benediction, looking straight into his eyes.

"I'll never see you again, Ared," said she, "and so I can tell you. I've tried to open the door, Ared, and I'd like to open it, and go in and comfort you. But you've locked it against me from the inside. Good-bye!"

She was away, rods down the road, and the sound of her galloping horse's feet was loud in his ears before he understood. Pardner loved him, perhaps as he loved the other! She had been trying to make him understand; weeks back she had tried to make

him see. In a flash the past was translated for him.

He felt that he could not allow her to depart like that, without one word of comfort, or a confession of the self-abasement that he felt for his blindness, but his voice seemed dead in his throat; it would not rise to hail her. In a moment more she was gone, and the clatter of her mount's hoofs was dimming in the night.

Here was a new thing come to trouble him. It had the regret in it of knowing that Jo was honest, brave, generous and good, and that he had given her pain. But he could not love her, the other had possession of his endowment, and he had no more to give. Above the turmoil of regret, and blame which he attached to himself for having been blind so long, he knew that it would have been better for him if he had loved Josephine. There would have been none of this wild longing then, no wearying and outreaching of the heart.

He turned back toward the house, feeling disciplined, old. A little way from the door he paused, surveying the bleak scene, now softened like the recollection of an old regret under the mounting moon. The scars of their old explorations were there below him in the face of the naked hill, and beyond, the old derrick, standing guard over the last, deep bore.

It was given to the Heiskells, it seemed to him in that hour, to fasten their hearts upon, and waste their lives in pursuit of, the far, bright promises of

empty dreams. He groaned in his heart, and turned again toward that dream-desolated hearth.

There was a dim light in his father's window. As he passed he saw the old man kneeling at his bedside, his arms flung out across the covers, in the attitude of one who had supplicated and been denied. Ared stood a moment before the weathered door, his head bowed in miserable reflection.

"Yes," said he, lifting his hand to the latch, "it must be that the Heiskells are unlucky men!"

CHAPTER XVII

SOLOMON'S DREAM COMES TRUE

OLD Solomon was up before his son next morning, moving about with a briskness which seemed to indicate that the clouds of depression were breaking before the sun of his normally optimistic soul. After breakfast he went over the letter which he had drawn up for the printer, designed to be mailed to the stockholders, after Ared's suggestion of the previous day. He made such changes and additions as Ared thought fitting, or as had occurred to him after his night's reflection.

Ared framed the advertisement which he proposed to insert in the *Oil City Star* that day, making a particular point of the fact that he was prepared to make explorations for oil on a percentage basis. This resolution he had taken even that morning, for he believed that Triggerheel would allow him the use of the money which he had reserved, to that end. He intended to make a clean front of it to the old man, and place it before him squarely. If he desired to part company then, of course he would be free to go.

The day had come on with bright encouragement

for high resolutions, a far-blown breath of spring in the soft, warm air. The earth was sweating beneath its covering of leaves and fallen grasses around the Heiskell home, in promise of the pasturage which soon would spring.

As Ared took the road he felt a strong regret for the peace which he had lost, contrasting it with the uncertainty and turmoil of his present outlook. For him the hour was late, but he doubted whether he should yet find the newspaper office open upon his arrival in town, and from that reason he proceeded leisurely, turning over in his mind his meeting in that road with Josephine Ryland the night before. He pictured her again as she spurred away in haste.

If he could make her happier by dissimulation, thought he, or put that other one far enough out of his heart to give her room, he would go to her. But such a compromise with conscience could not carry happiness for either of them, and it would be ungenerous and unjust to accept everything from Josephine and give nothing such as she demanded, in return. He concluded that it was better to allow her to depart unseen again, and go her way, and forget him, as he should be forgotten, as he deserved to be forgotten for his small deserts.

It was half a mile out from town that he met Jane Sloane, coming afoot along the road, which the thaw had softened and turned into tenacious clay. While she was still distant he knew her, and a score of shifting conjectures came into his mind to account for

her presence on that road, unattended, and in such pressing haste.

She came on, holding to the middle of the highway, like one afraid of losing the road, instead of seeking a drier footing in the side paths, where the turf was thick and the ground still frost-bound beneath it. They were not more than a rod apart, Ared walking in the by-path, when she recognised him.

Her face was as bright as the morning, and animated, it seemed, by some new eagerness. He saluted her gravely, and would have passed on, for all the agitation in his breast, which his stern, strong face did not betray. She came over the muddy road hurriedly, and held out her hand in a little motion of appeal.

"Mr. Heiskell, I know you better this morning than I knew you yesterday," said she, with gravity in her voice in spite of the startling abruptness of her words.

"We were scarcely ourselves yesterday, none of us. You could not have been expected——"

"Oh, I knew you then, too, the moment you spoke in the door before I saw your face. I knew you then—I don't mean that."

"It wouldn't have been inexcusable if you had forgotten. I am just one common man in a world full of them."

"Not just that," she denied, meeting his calm eyes frankly. "But mother knew nothing of our

previous meeting—will you accept that as my reason for my unaccountable, and seemingly thankless, conduct?"

"We met and passed in the night," said he simply.

"Will you turn back with me?" she asked. "I'm on my way to your place."

"It's easier going over on this side," said he, his wonder growing almost apace with his admiration of her, which was already beyond all bounds.

She hesitated in the path, Ared standing in the rutted road.

"But there's no use going on if your father isn't there," she said.

"He is there."

"Then I must see him."

She resumed the journey eagerly, striking out with free, strong limbs, her short skirt playing about her shoe tops. He walked on beside her, and if there was more trouble and disappointment going with her, thought he, then his sentinel forebodings were off duty. Instead of the heaviness and choking sense of impending disaster, there was a strange expectancy, untinctured by apprehension, in his breast. It seemed to make his feet light upon the way, and to set a song ringing in his heart.

"I have done him a tremendous, cruel wrong!" she said, again putting out her hand with that speaking little gesture of appeal. "I want to take his hand and tell him that I was mistaken; I want to tell him that I *believe* in him—if he'll listen to me now."

Ared's heart swelled with a great inrush of tenderness for her. Impetuously, not fully conscious, perhaps, of what he did, he laid his hand on her arm, a glad light leaping in his eyes.

"If he'll listen!" said he, inept in the moment of his great surprise.

"Yes, if he can forgive my seeming heartlessness. I know you better to-day, Ared Heiskell, than I did yesterday, much, much better, and I want to talk with you, too."

She seemed as ingenuous as a child, and in such a haste to go to the old man and carry to him the balm of confidence. Thrilling with the most profound sensation of his life, Ared trudged on beside her.

"It is like carrying bread to the starving," he said.

"Yesterday, when you put that money on the table by my hand, I knew that I was wrong," said she contritely. "And then, when I turned in the door and saw that dear old father of yours with his hand on your shoulder, as tender as a sweetheart, and heard him speak to you in the eloquence of his sorrow, my heart was almost broken!"

She had fallen into a lagging pace as she talked. The roadway was winding there, and bordered with trees. The sun was not yet over the hill, and there was frost on the russet leaves of the scrub oak which clustered inside the mouldering fence. Ared measured his gait to hers, his head bowed in melancholy review of the painful scene which she had described.

"All night his words were in my ears, so pitiful, so

hopeless: 'Oh, lad, lad!' I intended to come this morning; I would have come, even if Miss Ryland——"

"Pardner!" said he, stopping, looking at her with a cast of pain in his earnest face. "She shouldn't—Oh, little Pardner, little Pardner!" he said in a voice of deep, sorrowful rebuke.

"This morning, before she went to the station to take the train, she came to see me, and she said—I'll not tell you what she said, but if I were a certain man I'd go down on my knees and worship her!"

"Poor little Pardner!" said he gently, as to himself.

"I was coming, anyhow; I ask you and your father only to believe that much of me," said she.

"You were coming," he repeated, with such eloquent earnestness that she turned to him with a quickening flash of gratitude over her mobile face.

"To give you back this money"—she presented it, drawing it from her muff as she spoke—"and tell both of you that I believe in you, and that I believe the oil is *there*, and to ask you to go on with the work and find it!"

There was no glove on the strong, steady hand that clasped the little roll of money, and Ared Heiskell stopped, and made it a prisoner between his own.

There was a light in his face such as comes to a few men once, to thousands not at all, the light that breaks over the troubled waters, showing the reward

of his dreams at hand. In such a moment a man may prophesy, and lift his soul up to his God.

"I set my heart to win up to you, Jane Sloane, no matter what the distance, no matter what the height," he said, his voice deep and slow, his eyes seeming to draw her, like a strong hand, to his arms, "and now you have come! I thought this day to be years ahead of me, and that I could reach it only by strife and sorrow and bitter blows. But you have come to me, you have come!"

Her face was white, her hand was trembling, but there was a light of ecstasy in her eyes as if she listened to some noble instrument in a sonorous lift of music. So for a moment she stood, her breath panting in her lips. Then she took her hand away, and the glad light passed out of her tender eyes.

"But Pardner—Pardner loves you, lad. Do you want to go to her?" she said.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked, his hand on her shoulder, tenderly.

"You didn't take back the money," said she, her face flashing rosy, "you must take it back."

"If you say the oil is there, then I say it, also, and I believe it as I believed it once, when I put the labour of my youth into the search for it, and gathered ashes for my gain. But if you say it's there, then I'll say it's there, and I'll bring my machinery here to-day and begin the old quest anew."

"And we'll never stop till we get it, for I *know* it's

there!" she said, her eyes glowing, her cheeks as red as sunset.

"If we need that money that I paid you as capital, and you want to go that far with us in the exploration——"

"It's yours, not mine," she insisted.

"Then we'll use it," he finished, "for I haven't any more, that emptied the barrel. You keep it; you'll be the treasurer. Let's go on now, and carry the news up the hill. I want to tell him that to-day the Heiskell luck has changed—we're unlucky men no more!"

They faced again toward the homestead.

"Fleming knows the oil's there," said she, "I know it from what he said to mother as we were going back to town yesterday. He wants to keep the belief alive that there is none, so he'll be able at last to get hold of the land for nothing."

"Maybe," said he, a coldness falling over his high spirits at the recollection of her relations with Fleming yesterday. She saw it, as any woman would have seen.

"I don't like Fleming any better, and I don't trust him any farther than I did that night you saved me from his unwelcome attentions," she said. "I want you to know this. I don't like him, and I don't trust him."

"I'm sure you do not," said he, the clouds passing away.

"He met us in the hotel yesterday morning—we

came in the night before—and sort of took possession of us, like I think he must do of everything that he wants, no matter what his right. He made out with a big bluff that he'd known me when I sang here that week, and mother was a little bit dazzled by his local consequence and flattered by his great show of interest in our affairs. He said he knew that your father had brought a big share of the money the company had collected here with him, and that he could make him pay us. That's how we came to go with him yesterday. But I'm not with him to-day," she finished, with a quick little smile.

Heiskell nodded, understandingly.

"I suppose he believed that father had the money hidden up here somewhere, like he'd have had it himself. I think that fellow Drumm must have been like Fleming."

"Nothing like him in appearance. He was tall and thin, and he had the most appealing, truthful eyes in the world," said she. "Nature seemed to have designed him to deceive."

The timbers of the derrick at the old well could be seen from where they were now, but for three years or more the undergrowth had been so thick that the dangling drill and the rusting engine had been hidden from passers-by. Ared pointed the derrick out to her.

"That hole is more than half a mile deep," he said, "and it's so well curbed against seepage that it's dry. Father has kept it covered, and the drill

is hanging over it, just as it was the day we stopped work on it, more than seven years ago."

Ared must have admitted a note of his old discouragement and disbelief into his expression, for she spoke with new conviction.

"It's there, Fleming wouldn't be so anxious to ruin you, and drive you out of the country if he didn't know that a wealth of oil was hidden under those rocks. We'll find a new place for a well, and go deeper, if we must, but we'll *get* it."

Solomon was not at the house when they arrived. Jane remained outside in the sun while he looked through the rooms.

"No, he's not here," he said, joining her in a little while. "But he's around somewhere; you'd better go in and sit by the fire while I look him up."

He went in with her to make her comfortable. The sun reached in through the open door and fell upon the hearth, where the morning fire had burned down to coals. Solomon's chair stood before it, as he had left it but a little while before. Ared moved it a little nearer the fire.

"Sit here, and I'll go out and find him," he said. "He can't be far away, for I left him here scarcely half an hour ago."

"He seems to have left a letter for you," she said, taking it up from the table, where it had lain among the litter of papers unnoticed.

"That's strange—and he intended to post it, too, it's sealed and stamped. That's very strange!"

He stood turning the letter in his hand, as one will do when there is dread or uncertainty of its contents. He put his hat down on the table, and brushed his thick hair back from his brow, as if settling himself to receive a blow. Perplexity, anxiety, mingled in shadows over his face, where the sterner emotions could make no mark.

She watched him, moved by his own indefinable fear.

"I don't suppose I'd be anticipating his confidence—" he looked at her, questioningly, as if for permission—"by opening it? He intended that I should receive it through the postoffice, but——"

With sudden decision he opened it, dropping the envelope at his feet.

MY SON: It breaks my heart to leave you again, but we must part. There is nothing that I can do to help you in the mighty task that you have undertaken in my name, and my presence might hinder. This retreat will be the first knowing act of cowardice in my life.

Lately there has settled over me the firm conviction that there is ill luck in my presence. I feel that none of your undertakings will prosper if my shadow falls on them. I firmly believe that my coming into your last venture, when success was in your hands, was foredoomed by the evil forces which have directed my miserable destinies.

My earnest appeal to you, my son, is that you get rid of the old boiler which you removed from here, and shun this place, with all its unfortunate associations, until you have made your fortunes secure. There is disaster in all things

which my hands have touched, which my feet have pressed.

Before leaving I shall destroy the old derrick, drum, tackle and drill. You will know by this whose hand has done the work, and attach no unjust blame. But for the associations which hallow this hearth, I would burn the old house to the ground. I have had it in my mind to do it, but the sacred memory of your mother has stayed my hand. I hope that her holy remembrance secures it against my blight.

I shall withdraw from the world's activities, and seclude myself under another name, seeking such humble employment as will serve to supply my needs. After a due lapse of time I will communicate with you, and when our skies have brightened we shall be reunited. There is hope in my heart that I may do something, achieve something, to requite you yet. I feel that I shall not quit this world leaving you no other legacy than that of debt and disgrace. So I am going cheerfully, and in hope. May the Almighty sustain you in the manly fight that you have assumed for my sake. My benediction, and farewell.

Ared handed the letter to Jane Sloane, and turned his face to the window to conceal his emotion from her eyes. When she had finished it she turned to him, excitedly.

"We must bring him back, we must go after him—I'll not let him go like this!"

"He hasn't gone yet," he said, "or the letter would not have been here. He's about the place somewhere, preparing to carry out his plans. I shouldn't wonder—listen! Do you hear anything that you—listen!"

"I heard it before," she whispered, scarcely breathing, "like rushing water. I thought it was a fall."

"There is none—" he began, only to stop, like one distracted, and hurry outside. Jane followed, and found him standing near the corner of the house, his arms uplifted as if to ward a blow, his face white, his wild hair tossing in the wind.

"Look! the old well!" said he, catching her hand and setting off down the hill.

A little way from it they stopped, where the heavy drops from the breaking column of oil that gushed from the casing splattered the leaves at their feet. Bigger than anything of its kind that Ared Heiskell ever had seen, greater in its fulfilment than the most extravagant desire of his old dreams, was the volume of oil which the abandoned well spouted. Now it rose half the height of the derrick, with a roar like a wind in a forest; now it sank almost to the lip of the well, throbbing like an artery leading from the great, deep heart of the fountain ahead.

All around it the ground was deep in oil, which had been thrown out so fast that it had not yet found its level and settled down in pools, and tossed and flung in the playing jet which rose and fell, was the end of the great rope upon which the string of drilling tools had hung.

In the first amazed shock they had not grasped the great thing in detail. Now Jane clutched his arm and leaned, pointing.

"Look, it's a man! There's a man——"

Already Ared had plunged through the cataract of oil. In a moment he emerged again, bearing the body of old Solomon Heiskell in his arms.

They stretched him upon the ground, a few rods from the well, and Jane Sloane wiped the oil from his face. Ared was feeling for a heart-beat, for the body was warm and limp, as if he had been stricken but a few minutes before their arrival.

But Solomon Heiskell's troubled heart was still. There was no music for his ears in the sound of that mighty geyser, no triumph for his eyes in its towering column of wealth.

Ared understood how Solomon had brought in the well. Intent on his determination to destroy the derrick, and thus remove one monument at least of his disappointed years, he had lowered the string of tools into the well and cut the rope. The heavy implement had plunged down like a cannon-shot, down for an unobstructed half mile, to the last remaining shell of rock between the bottom of the bore and the pent-up treasure of oil. It had burst through, like a nail through tissue paper, and old Solomon's dream had come true in one quick stroke.

Whether the gas issuing from the long-pent well had smothered him as he leaned over it, listening for the drill to strike, or whether his heart had swelled and broken when he heard the oil gushing in the tube, none could ever know. Neither would it ever be known whether his weary, longing old eyes had

beheld that golden stream, of which he seemed to speak so prophetically in his last written word to his son. Solomon Heiskell was removed from his strivings and his troubles, but he had left behind him a legacy far from that of debt and disgrace.

"I believed him, I believed him, but I came too late!" Jane Sloane moaned, kneeling beside the old man's body, her hands pressed to her face.

"And I—I did not always believe him, and I have come too late!" said Ared, stretching out his long arms like one crucified, above the husk that had housed a vision too great for the conception of little men.

* * * * *

Evening. The coroner had come and gone, and the marvelling multitude had beaten the old road with its thousand feet, and trampled round the mouth of the greatest oil well that the Southwest ever had seen. Old Solomon Heiskell's body lay in the room where he had slept his fevered sleep in life, and Jane Sloane's mother sat in his old chair before the fire.

Men had come and capped the mighty well, and bound its wealth down to pour only at the turning of a valve, like a monster tamed to the guidance of the human hand, for above the pangs of regret, and the wild ravings of sorrow, Ared had felt that there were obligations to the living, as well as duties to the dead. The Prophet's Well Oil Company was suddenly one of the richest concerns in the field of

exploration, and seventy-five per cent of its stock remained unsold and in his hands. His heart warmed when he recalled Triggerheel's confession of having bought ten thousand shares. Now that hastily placed hundred dollars had made the old man rich.

As the last clamp was fastened, and the workmen went away, and the last wonder-stricken visitor had turned about, silent in the awe of the thing that he had seen, Ared spoke to Jane Sloane, standing by his side. The sun was red on the hillside; it tinged the pools of oil with shuddering crimson; it tinted the trampled landscape with the hues of a sanguinary field of strife.

"Now you are rich," said he.

"I suppose so," she replied. "But there is something lacking to give it the thrill. If I only had come sooner—if I only had come!"

"You were coming—you came," said he, satisfied that it was so.

"How precious a moment is in this fleeting life!" she sighed, tears following tears over her sorrowful face.

"You will be going away now," said he after a spell of self-communing silence. "Milan, Paris, Berlin, I suppose, to pursue your studies and round out your ambitions."

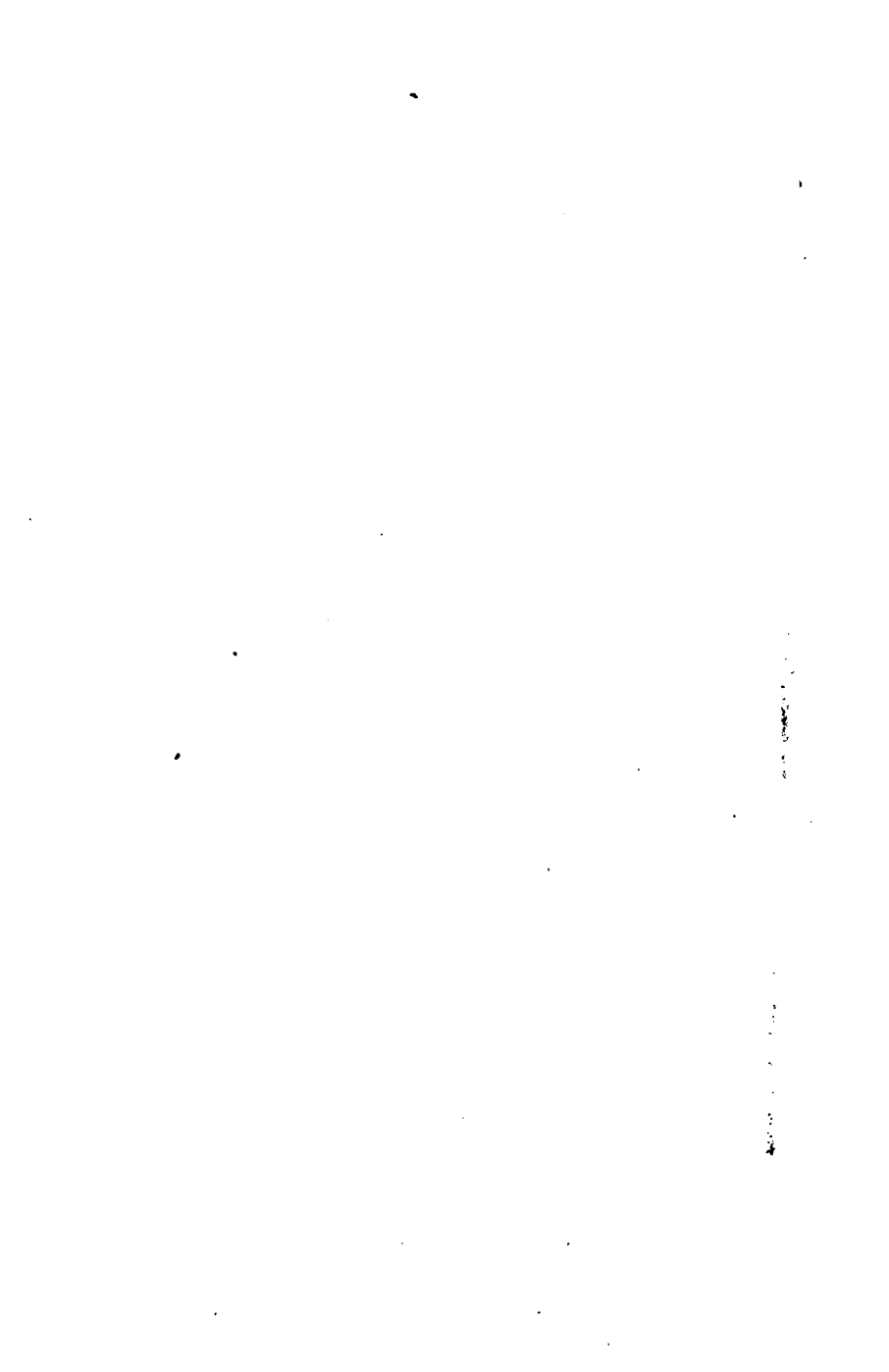
"No, I am not going," she said.

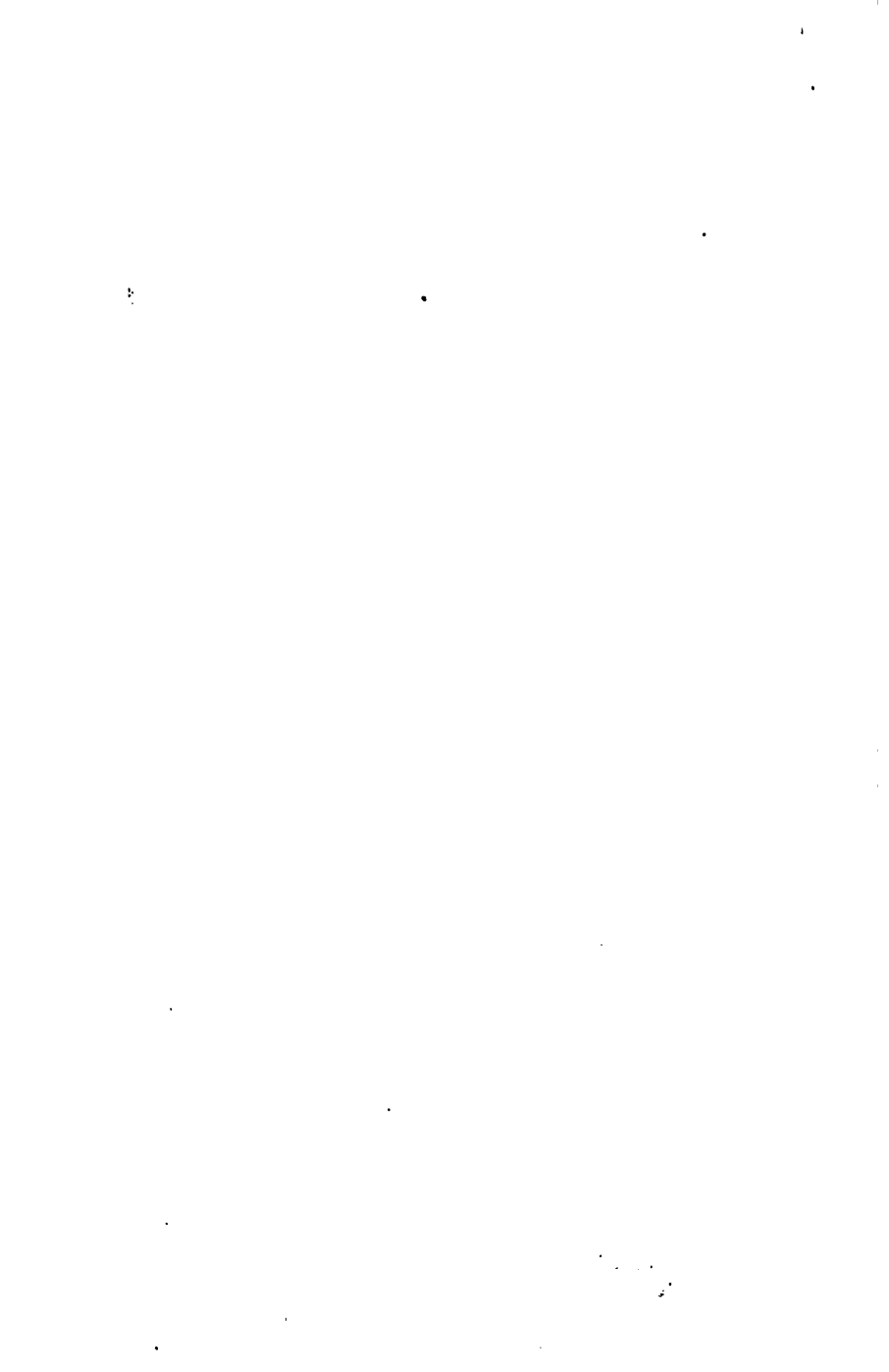
"The world will miss your song," said he softly, as if telling it to his own sad heart.

"I shall not sing for the world," said she, taking his hand and holding it tenderly, stroking it softly, as if to ease his pain. "I shall sing"—dreamily, looking away into the fire of evening—"I shall sing, but only for those who love me."

**RETURN TO
HUDSON MAXIM:
LANDING, N. J.**

THE END.







~~They are not to be taken as~~
~~but a mere change of day.~~

But it is a shame that the
The Great Commission is not being
The Great Commission is not being
America's largest church is the largest
than was ever recorded before
Now in our hands is the
The biggest thing is the
But the biggest thing is the
All of the things that are
And the biggest thing is the
For the biggest thing is the

